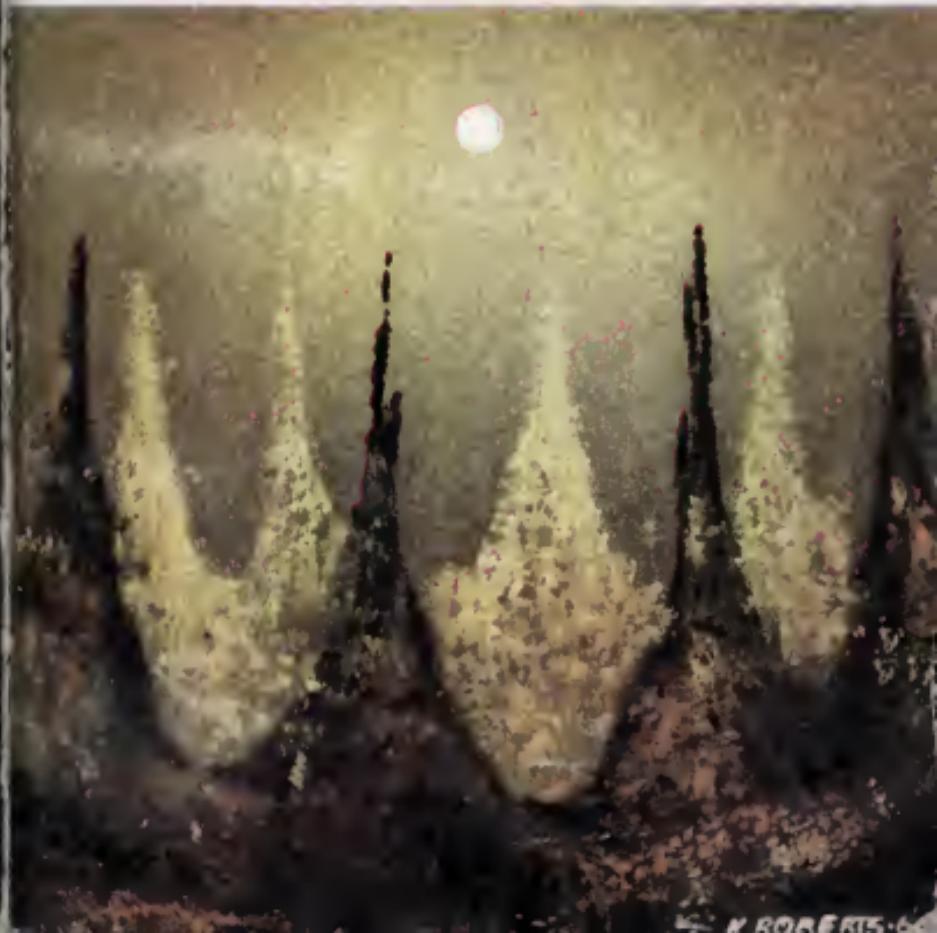


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The NEW Science Fantasy

JOHN RANKINE THE SEVENTH MOON



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COMPACT
SF

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The NEW Science Fantasy

Edited by Kyril Bonfiglioli

Associate Editor: Keith Roberts

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Editorial by Cyril Bonfiglioli

Ever since the Renaissance in England—the reign of Elizabeth I for all practical purposes—fiction has concerned itself almost exclusively with the amatory antics of one particular species of biped—us. From the improbably simple characters of Richardson, Fielding and Jane Austen to the implausibly complex ones of Angus Wilson and Iris Murdoch today, the novel and shorter stories have consisted largely of what, when it takes place over a garden wall, we call gossip. Very occasionally a great novel has been created from “biped-meets-other-animal” (Melville), “biped-meets-place” (Defoe) and “biped-meets-concept”, but there has never been a literary ‘kind’—in fiction, that is—which has really succeeded in breaking away from *h. sapiens* as the essential pivot. Probably the long and short of it is that most humans who can read are really only interested in other humans, while the kind of humans who are interested in higher (?) things have tended to be the kind of humans who wouldn’t care for the kind of thing written by the kind of humans who would write fiction. If you see what I mean.

In the 1920’s, when compulsory education had really got a grip on the English-speaking world, a number of quasi-literary ‘kinds’ were developed to exploit the new mass quasi-literate market. The most important of these was the cheap daily paper (it has been said that Lord Northcliffe was the only man to derive any real benefit from the Education Act) but its more frankly fictional contemporaries included such familiar phenomena as the Western, the thriller, the “romance” and the science-story. All these, however much we may revere them as the forerunners of fine later work, were—let’s face it—trashy imitations of late-Victorian archetypal best sellers: Zane Grey, Wilkie Collins, Mrs. Humphrey Ward and H. G. Wells to name the obvious ones. All of them, of course, were still strongly biped-oriented with the exception of the so-called science stories in which, with their fringe of “weird”, “strange” and “supernatural” elements, some

thoughtful people, even then, saw the possibility of the growth of a wholly imaginative and speculative fiction with a minimal basis of ordinary real experience.

Here was the chance to shake off the trammels of the Renaissance and to examine imaginatively man's actual and possible environments; to reverse Pope's pompous dictum—

“Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
The proper study of mankind is Man.”

Here, in fact, was the seed of a literature which might scan God—or his equivalent—in the same searching way that the novel had been interminably scanning Boy in his quest for Girl.

What happened? Well, we got our literature: some of the best writers working today are not ashamed to turn their hands to science-fiction and even the pulp magazines—like this one—print work of a quality which makes their pre-war predecessors look infantile. But has imagination been set free; is science-fiction speculating away about the universal context of the scrap of dirt on which we bipeds breed and squabble?

Well, no. Outer space? “Space opera”—what we want is Inner Space and psychological insights into our fascinating selves. Other possible life forms? “Bug Eyed Monsters”—all been done before. Religious fantasy? “shaggy god stories”, out of vogue. Possible scientific innovations? Well, only if they cause us fascinating bipeds to react in an interesting new way. In short, we’re back at a highly-polished, highly-literate, highly-sophisticated Square One, on which Theodore Sturgeon—one of the greatest—announces:

“A good science fiction story is a story about human beings, with a human problem, and a human solution, which would not have happened at all without its science content.”

Oh well, I still prefer it to Westerns.

Which reminds me that Ben Jason has asked me to tell

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The people of Bromius were pleasure-loving and uninhibited. But they had a secret life which seemed to be bound up with the—

SEVENTH MOON

by John Rankine

I

Spencer was almost apologetic, "I put the case, Dag, as fully as you have it there. But the vote went for a further investigation. I'd like you to take the file and get up to date. It's your affair now. There was some pressure on the committee."

"That's all right, Chairman. I know the score. Neal Walker had friends in high places. It isn't the first time the heat's been on for that sort of reason. But no blame attaches to Walker for that. He was a good captain. One of the best in the fleet. Whatever happened to *Two-Nine* would have happened with any other man I can think of; but perhaps in any other case, the committee would have accepted the I.G.O. report and authorized a Final Notice."

Paul V. Spencer had taken the unusual course of coming himself to his Senior Controller's office and now made his way round the wide desk to the private elevator which connected with the Chairman's Suite. He knew that the problem he was leaving behind him was virtually insoluble, and, in spite of his pompous, self-important way, truly regretted that he had to dump it in Fletcher's lap, the moment he took up duty after an end-of-mission leave. But there were no slack periods in this service. Crisis was normality. He fired his parting shot as the clean, functional grille closed behind him, "I'll expect your observations and a preliminary scheme of search by 1200 hours tomorrow."

The cage was beginning to move, when he added, "Welcome back, I hope you had a good trip."

Dag Fletcher stood for a long minute weighing the small grey box of micro tapes in his hand. It was now 1430. He had less than twenty-four hours.

He flicked in the robot secretary and the centre of his desk glowed with a congestion of data which had been held over by his deputy for attention. Simultaneously, its cool electronic voice began to purr out a condensed memo. It was an all too familiar routine. Before its take-over bid could win out, he said, "Shut your cotton picking diaphragm," and snapped down the life saving cancellation stud.

Instead, he activated the summoning bell for his flesh and blood help, and opened Pandora's box.

Vanessa had been waiting, with more patience than a casual observer would give her credit for. Startling red hair in the proportions of a full bottomed wig and an operatic figure, went badly with the role of Griselda; but where Dag Fletcher was concerned, she managed to suppress her personal drives for the public good.

When the iris eye shutter sliced quietly back and she appeared, framed by the stainless steel surrounds, in a minimal black cheongsam, he had already fed in a micro-tape. It was a good entrance, spoiled by being unnoticed. One thing was for sure, they were in for a long session. She stepped out of the frame and said, practically, "Shall I have some coffee sent up?"

"Do that." He pressed a 'pause' button and Neal Walker's voice cut off dead. "You're looking more gorgeous every time I come back, Vanessa. What do you do whilst I'm away?"

"Wait with bated breath, of course."

"It's as good as therapy. But tell me about this Two-Nine case. What do you know?"

"There's an abstract, Controller Fairclough handled this end. Not that there was anything that could be done except inform I.G.O."

"Yes, I have all the tapes here. I expect the abstract

is one. But what's your impression?" He knew that the decorative appearance could be misleading. Vanessa had a shrewd grasp of the realities. What final imprint had been left on her mind would be worth hearing about.

She said, "Taking it from the beginning, *Interstellar Two-Nine* went out exactly thirty days after you'd gone. You know its mission. Preliminary enquiries had been made before you left. It was a charter job. Nice and simple really. Out direct to Fingalna, where they picked up Dr. Izod. Then across the Centre to Croton. At least, they were aiming for Croton. But this they never reached. The last transmission, from Commander Walker, came when they had Croton in sight and were taking the established route through the gravisphere of Bromius."

"Bromius control spoke to them?"

"Of course."

Of course, Bromius control would speak to a passing ship. They were the most correct and courteous people in the galaxy. A by-word for meticulous observance of every code set up by the Inter-Galactic Organization. Dag remembered two visits he had paid there. One, as an I.G.O. frigate commander, on the routine decennial inspection. Pointless here. There were no offensive arms to inspect. The people seemed to be free from all aggressive impulses. They had no space fleet of their own and took out charter flights for any special space work in their own planetary system. It was a small planet, half the size of Earth and thinly populated. The frigate's crew had been very impressed by the culture level and the slim, delicate, charming people, who had made them feel clumsy and boorish with their blundering, power-packed warship. It had been a short stay and they had left, garlanded with *leis*, in a tremendous aura of goodwill. No doubt half a ton of orchids were still circling the planet, where they had been jettisoned out of sight.

The other visit had been in one of the Corporation's freight and exploration ships. About five years ago. There was no change. Madoc, the head man of the closely knit community, had been particularly hospitable.

"So, what after that?"

A glow from the service elevator indicator took her

across to open a hatch, and lift out a tray with ceramic ware and a tall silver jug of black coffee. As she poured it, she went on, "Then, very little. Commander Walker went through the drill to establish an orbit round Croton. He talked to Croton control and they checked his landing plot. It was O.K. He received the 'all clear'. Then nothing more was heard."

"They were actually in orbit round Croton?"

"Yes."

"This Dr. Izod. Isn't he the Director of the Central Institute of Ethnology?"

"Yes. There's something about him on the abstract."

"Who organized the charter?"

"Earth Ethnology—it was a piece of joint research, though. Financed through I.G.O."

"Centre in Brasilia?"

"That's right."

"Why was the charter arrangement made with us? Southern Hemisphere Space H.Q. would have been handier."

It was typical of Dag Fletcher that he should begin to pursue some off-beat aspect of the situation. Vanessa recognized the symptoms; they were in for a devious trail. Before morning, every minute lead would be unravelled to its end.

Dag went on, "Never mind. I'll talk to them. The charter document I remember. Fairclough made the preliminary arrangements. Get me the local Director in Brasilia." Minutes later, the miniature screen set in his desk top was glowing with the orchid pattern of Brasilia's WAIT signal. He transferred it to a life size wall screen. It would be better to take a good look at the personality at the dispatch end.

In the event, his forethought was pure gain by any standard. When the pattern dissolved into a pale green mist and the mist cleared to show head and shoulders of the Director, he was looking at a replica of Nefertiti, which would have fooled her Akhenafon. A deep, elaborate necklace of *lapis lazuli* showed tantalizing patches of pale brown with lighter tints, where the frame made its churlish bar across her chest.

She said, "Director Xenia Cordoban. What can I do for you, Controller?"

The voice was low pitched, and used English as if it was thick cream to be spooned out. He could have replied, in truth, that she had already done quite a lot for him; but, with a commendable sense of duty, he put business first.

"Thank you for seeing me so promptly, Director. It is a question of the loss of your expedition, which included Dr. Izod. I have just come onto the case. It might help me to know exactly what your party was aiming for."

"Certainly. I have the details here. One moment only."

The screen blanked whilst the decorative Ethnologist found the file. Then the large kohl-rimmed eyes with green shaded lids and flared brows were looking once more into the office.

"Our party was working on a sub-culture on Croton. There was—is, in fact—a theory that the dominant group on that planet are recent arrivals, ethnologically speaking. It is likely that they came from some other planet in that system and imposed their culture on the indigenous people."

"So?"

"I know this seems a trivial matter, when this has happened so often. But the theory goes on to suspect, at least, that they came from Bromius. It was to confirm or reject this that Dr. Izod went along. He was proposing to do deep hypnotic analysis of a sample group on both planets to try to equate race memories. He believed it was a likely thing."

Dag said, "Thank you, Director. I must say you amaze me. On the face of it, there couldn't be anything less likely. You will know that there is no record, whatsoever, to suggest that the Bromius people ever were interested in extra-terrestrial travel. But leaving that. What personnel did you send?"

"Six from here. The Deputy Director, Juan Gonzales; three other men and two women. They were to pick up Dr. Izod and two assistants in Fingalna before going on."

"That is all you know?"

"What else could there be?"

"You have no private opinion of what might have happened?"

"Controller," the voice was at its creamiest. "That is far more in your line than mine. I am strictly concerned with things factual."

Dag knew he would get no further. He had a feeling that there was something more. Nothing perhaps important, but a reservation about the aim which might be suppressed out of departmental loyalty, now that the attempt, anyway, had failed.

"Thank you again, Director. You have been very helpful. One last point. Why did you arrange the charter with us and not your local space service?"

"Just economics, Controller. You are so very efficient that your prices were twenty per cent cheaper. A foundation like this has to watch costs. Is that all? Goodbye then."

Vanessa was glad to trip the switch that put Xenia back in South America; but it was not only the competitive spirit which made her add, "Ethnological slut!"

"You don't like the serpent of old Nile?"

"Not much. I wouldn't trust her farther than you could throw a pyramid."

Dag said, "Why did we allow nine? *Interstellar Two-Nine* would be seriously understaffed at that. It would mean that only eight space crew could fly."

He realized that he had questioned the informative Vanessa far enough. No doubt, Neal Walker's first tape on the commissioning conference would answer that. He put it in the feed slot and the command cabin of the ship came up bright and clear on the wall vacated by Xenia.

It was an all too familiar scene. *Two-Nine* was one of the smallest deep space craft and its control room was barely fifteen feet square. All eight of the Space Corporation personnel were crowded in there. He knew every one. Indeed, he had appointed some of them; but it was interesting to see which crew members Walker had chosen for the skeleton staff.

Walker's brisk, authoritative voice began the routine outline of the mission. Dag could listen to it and look round

the group. Pete Berry, the co-pilot, seated beside his skipper, was listening with his head bowed, looking at his hands relaxed in front of him on the table. Dark, short, stocky build, a very steady man. Next to him, Brian Jones, Executive Power, senior in service on the ship and therefore ranking third. Another first class man. The angle of the picture emphasized the shape of his head; unusually round, hair receding, thick dark eyebrows. Then John Orchard, Navigation Executive, long narrow face, fair, one of the best navigators in the fleet and veteran of many missions.

In profile, Roy Walsh, Power No. 2 and Paul Scanton, Communications No. 2 faced in from the ends of the chart spread. Both angular, spiky youngsters, similar in medium brown colouring, but Scanton experimenting with a short spade beard.

Backs to the scanner's eye, the two women crew members presented trim, functional hair styles and Delia Loyden, the blonde Communications Executive, was already wearing a ribbed, black inner suit which outlined shoulders and arms in a smooth, flattering sheath. Gerda Triggs, beside her, still wore a square-shouldered tabard and her dark closely curled hair emphasized its heraldic possibilities.

It was as good a crew as could be handpicked from the service. Whatever had gone wrong must have been totally out of the ordinary. That was the rub. Everything said that this was a nursemaid mission, which any novice crew could have carried out. Yet this experienced group had muffed it in some way. Why for God's sake?

Walker had got to the end of the spiel. Nothing fresh there. Just an outline of what he had already gathered. Clearly Walker was not bothered by the reduced crew. He ended with, "So. There's a period of one month on Croton, whilst the research people do their work, then the route in reverse, calling only long enough to refuel at Fingalna. The round trip should take four months. Any questions?"

Dag stopped it there and picked out the final tape. Again he got the control room of *Two-Nine*. Neal Walker was at the command console and the legend POWER 1, across the broad shoulders of the figure at the Power desk, identi-

fied Brian Jones. They were following precise instructions. Duty personnel on a ship entering orbital path should be in full gear. That in itself showed where they were. This transmission was timed at 1400 hours on day 49 of the mission. They were ahead of schedule.

Walker was talking to Croton. The distant voice of the Croton operator, clipped and precise as he used the unfamiliar Earth language, came over faintly. It was like the man said. The transmission ended. Walker cut it off. And that was it. Nothing more.

Dag stubbed a button for a replay and listened again. On the fourth run through, he was with Walker and Jones in that cabin. Tiny aural clues had built up. He had the sense of the ship round him. From countless hours of experience in craft like *Two-Nine*, he could fill out the blanks. What was going on? He found himself, silently miming the drill as the tape created the scene again and again.

At the end of the transmission, he found that he would have held on a little longer. Walker had covered every necessary angle; but there was no need to close quite so soon. In fact, he now believed that he would have held the link open for the rest of the way in.

On the tenth run through, he was sure that Walker had closed early. Every noise on the tape fitted in with the scene except one close to the end. He ran the end piece again and again.

Vanessa had gone back to her own office and came in, without much hope, to point out that he had only minutes left, if he wanted to catch a refectory meal before they closed down.

Dag said sharply, "Do that again."

"The bit about the refectory?"

"No. Come in again."

She came in, anxious to please, like a messenger in a rehearsal.

"Out again."

He played the end of the tape once more and he had it clear. That hatch behind Walker, not in vision, had been opened. That had prompted him to close the circuit.

One thing was evident. It was not a watch change. And

it was unlikely that another crew man would come into the control room in an off duty period. They had seen enough of it. That left one of the passengers. An irregularity, but not serious. In a small ship crew and passengers would be on close terms.

So, put that way, there was something fresh. Walker closed the transmission early, because a passenger came in for a chat. Not unexpectedly, or he would have turned to see. And after that a simple run in on one of the easiest orbital paths in the galaxy turned into an Indian rope trick.

The next thing to do was obviously to have a look at the passenger list. A petulantly glowing light over the connecting door to the Secretary's office reminded him of Vanessa. When she came in, he said, "Get me the Ethnological Institute in Fingalna. I don't care what time of day it is there; but I want pictures and record profiles of the three people who joined *Two-Nine*. Also you can get on to Fairclough. There should be profiles on the six who joined here. Then push off home. I'll take it on from there."

She said, "That's all right, Controller. I have plenty to do. I'll stay on. If you can take time now for a meal, I'll have those profiles ready when you get back."

In the event, it was almost dusk before the full set of data was assembled. Lights were going up on the distant gantries of the space port at the perimeter of H.Q. complex. A time for nostalgia, a time when it was easier to think oneself into the situation of the missing ship.

Dag dimmed the main lights of his office and had the research team projected, life size, on the long wall. Nine. They fell into three groups and he shuffled the pictures around so that the group characteristics were emphasized. Academic types—that was Dr. Izod, small, very dark, thin faced; Dr. Gonzales, greying, handsome, large bland face and Dr. Lorenz his assistant, late twenties smiling toothily—a housewives' choice if ever was.

Women, Sorcha Menaldi and Vanora del Rio, medical doctors both. The hypnotists, no doubt. Small, plump, could be sisters, probably in the mid forties. Reina Vair, listed as Izod's secretary. A hypnotist in her own right. If she were Walker's visitor, it was no wonder he cut short

the chat with Croton. Vivid, dark, South American type. Lithe as a panther.

But it was the trio now bunched together on the left, which had him reaching for long distance again. Sangloss, Ross and Guilder were incongruous elements in a research set-up. He could recognize the type at once. They were purely and simply strong arm men. Heavily built, muscle conscious, with the deadpan look of the professional thug. A more unlikely trio for high level ethnological junketting could not easily have been assembled.

It took some time to raise Xenia Cordoban. This time, she looked like an Institute Director who had stepped straight out of a bath. Another centimetre of depth tuning and she would have been censored by Communications Control. Dag Fletcher, however, was in no mood to be sidetracked. He would have put the same question to Aphrodite. He said, "What function had Ross and Guilder on your expedition?"

There was a hard, non-co-operative ring about the voice, which fell unfamiliarly on the ear of the decorative Director. She took a deep breath, which momentarily put her in the red, tuning wise, and there was a touch of acid in the clotted cream, when she asked, "Why do details of my staff concern you, Controller? I could tell you to mind your own business."

"The loss of *Interstellar Two-Nine* is my business. Do I have to remind you that this is an I.G.O. matter? I can be over there in two hours with a *subpoena*. The Institute might lose its Directrice for some weeks."

"There was valuable equipment. Dr. Gonzales wanted protection for the team."

"And Sangloss?"

"The same. Dr. Izod took him in case of difficulty. Our work is sometimes amongst very primitive people. It is not unusual to take guards."

"It is unusual not to declare it on the manifest. Commander Walker was not so informed."

This was a chance shot. Xenia, however, was already believing that he had the full score.

"There might have been delays. There was a date line. We could not afford to waste time."

"No wonder you came to us. Southern Hemisphere Space would not have touched your three 'guards' at any price. What was the date line?"

"Really, Controller, your questions appear quite irrelevant. The ship was lost when in touch with a ground station. What possible difference can it make now?"

"What was the date line?"

"If it matters to you, May 29th Earth Reckoning. We wanted to begin our enquiries on that date."

"Why?"

"Really, Controller, it would take all night to explain that. Perhaps you had better come over, after all."

There was enough malice in the tone to cancel any welcome in the form of words.

"That's all right. We'll leave it there for now. Please stay somewhere available for the next twenty-four hours."

Outside, there was velvet, blue darkness with crescents of light from the blocks of offices and training departments. He sat looking at the blank wall. Where had he got? The expedition had concealed some facts on its declaration. There was probably something more in that direction. Very likely they were working on something which would not get I.G.O. approval and they had decided to go it alone. Well, that was not, in itself, a sinister thing. He had cut some corners in regulations himself before now. What followed? Nothing much. Whatever they were up to did not, presumably, include an elaborate and expensive suicide. Only Walker and his crew could work the ship.

Perhaps Walker had been persuaded to fall in with some plan? But even then the ship would have been traced. A dozen tracking stations had followed it so far. Why not further? They would pack up as soon as Croton control had accepted the plot.

It was a complete dead end. But he was now convinced that there was indeed something to investigate. There was a *prima facie* case for going to the expense of sending out a search craft. Somebody could go to the stellar reference of the last call from *Two-Nine* and take it from there. In fact, I.G.O. had sent a corvette into the area and found

nothing. But perhaps they ought not to be looking for wreckage at all?

Before calling Spencer, he had a look at the flight table. He should have a name to recommend. Sherratt would do it, if he was due in. There were others, too, who would do very well. For years he had advocated having a special stand-by craft for missions such as this. After much difficulty, it had finally been agreed and an obsolescent I.G.O. corvette had been purchased. Obsolescent in armament only. Power wise, it could outpace any civilian ship in any planetary fleet. It had not yet been used; but it was fitted out. Any one of those captains would be delighted to take out *Interstellar X*.

Spencer was already appearing out of the *fleur de lys* waiting sign of the European network, when Dag realized that he had no intention at all of recommending anyone. He would be going himself. The stand-by craft was the same Mark as the I.G.O. corvette he had commanded. Crew could be gathered from grounded personnel and they could be away, without waiting for a regular ship to come in. That would save dislocation of schedules. It was the obvious thing.

Forty-eight hours of fantastic effort later, *Interstellar X* was fuelled, commissioned and waiting on its pad. Crew men, brought grumbling from end-of-mission leave by a curt, brief summons, changed to something near enthusiasm, when the details were available. Fletcher himself, legendary as a commander, would make it a sell out; but the use of the corvette brought in another consideration. Every one of the deep space personnel had chafed, at some time, under the I.G.O. regulations, which sent even the freight and exploration ships unarmed into the interstellar wilderness. This time, they would be a force to be reckoned with in their own right. It was one thing for a local planetary boss to know that any action against a peaceful ship would bring down eventual retribution; it was quite another for him, or her, to know that retribution for hostility could be immediate and annihilating.

Final authorization from I.G.O. came tardily and

brought its special conditions. Very few space fleets had been allowed to commission an armed corvette. Past instances had always included insistence on the presence on board of a serving I.G.O. officer as an observer, with rights to intervene. This time, the condition was different; but in its way more binding. Spencer reluctantly agreed to the secondment of his Senior Controller to the I.G.O. fleet. This put Fletcher under I.G.O. discipline and control. He reverted to his rank of Commander in that service and was bound by its rules.

Spencer was at the pad to see them off. From the panoramic window of the central control tower, he could see *Interstellar X* wreathed in white steam as the heating tubes drove out condensed moisture. In the silent world of instrumentation, there was no accompanying jetting roar as the thrust built up. Technicians watched the computer panels record the log of progress. The scanner on the centre console had a picture of the craft's command cabin. Five of the crew of nine were visible, cocooned in space gear and strapped in shock cradles. That left Diggory Taft, Nadine Bennett, Tamar Kelly and Dave Sinclair at the unseen, key centres. Fletcher's casual voice came through, asking for clearance on the individual desks.

"Power. All systems Go." Frank Holdbrook's deep bass conjured up its picture of the dark, burly power executive.

"Navigation. All systems Go." A soprano. Elegant and precise. Averil Marr. A feather in her cap to be selected for this mission as navigation executive.

"Communications. All systems Go." A first time for Randle Hobbs as senior communications. A good choice that, one of the best of the younger men.

Then the co-pilot, Jim Scullion, presenting the final clearance.

Fletcher again. "Stand by. Counting down now." Clicks from a sweep second hand and more tension in the silent room than in the ship itself.

Then she was moving. With an intense, orange flower of flame uncurling like a specimen in time lapse photography; gathering momentum; flinging herself into a dwindling silver dot; passing into a new dimension.

Dictating his morning commentary into the log, which went out automatically to robot receptionists at Northern Hemisphere Space H.Q. and I.G.O., Dag Fletcher could only feel satisfaction with the mission so far. Any time off the office chain was pure gain, whichever way you looked at it; but this clockwork organization was about the best he had struck in a wide experience. Jim Scullion was an ideal No. 1 and the ship had no awkward crew member.

Usually there was one. But this time if he or she existed it was not yet apparent.

"Day 29. Sidercal plot as charted." He gave the scanner time to take a look at the chart spread and digest the complex details. At the same time, it picked up a soothing collection of human data from Tamar Kelly, communications number two, who was walking past it to the power desk. She was a striking redhead, with a tawny mane, which surged round her head in deep waves whenever she moved. On the sturdy side of perfect form, she had a pale, freckled skin, straight nose, short upper lip, wide mouth and more vitality than a confined space was meant to contain.

Dag went on with his chore. She passed out of the scanner's eye and went on to take the seated occupant of the power desk in a totally unfair neck lock, which seemed likely to lift off his head. Wisely, Dag released the recording button and set himself to sort it all out. Dave Sinclair, power two, and the third member of the watch group, was certainly in no position to help himself.

"Tamar?"

"Here, present, Commander."

"What is it then?"

"He's taken my lucky dog again."

"Dave?"

No answer was easily possible, so Fletcher went on, patiently. "Give the girl that obscene dog back and for the love of god, leave it alone."

When she was back at her desk, with the black, jolting

articulated puppet which sat or stood in any of a thousand grotesque poses, he was able to get on. It was something to be said for these two, that this teasing game was still fairly funny even to a spectator. Dag only reflected that, he would have been less inclined to let it stay at play level. Though, for that matter, probably it didn't when they were off duty.

He went on to confide in the recording micro tape. Six days clear of Fingalna and approaching the area of search. There was an opportunity to make up the back log of store check and fuel consumption data.

In the event, Holdbrook put a period to the travelogue aspect of the mission on day 32. Timed at 1423 hours precisely he stubbed the general alarm which brought spacesuited figures to ACTION STATIONS. Fletcher noted the time lapse and found he had collected executive reports at 1425.29. He opened the operational phase with a laconic "Well done, all."

That was the least that could be said to a team which had put *Interstellar X* dead centre on the last fix for the missing ship. Coming up within minutes of the final known position, they were orbiting Croton on the same tenuous computer thread.

Dag cleared his mind of every other consideration and went through the drill that Neal Walker had followed. The many repetitions of the record tape had fixed the details in his mind, so that the harmonics of Walker's voice overlaid his own. It was uncannily like speaking in an echo chamber.

Then they hit the spot and every factor was present, feeding its special slant into his computer mind. What possibly could have emerged in this situation to take *Two-Nine* off the beam?

For the first time, he was completely sure of one thing. The figures had suggested it. Now the total situation confirmed it. Nothing external to the ship had caused the deviation. He knew with absolute certainty that the trouble, whatever it was, had come from inside. That raised another point. If the ship had changed course, where had it gone? And to that there was only one answer.

Before committing the answer to the record, however, he

felt that he owed it to the mission to look at the angles once more. "Number One. Hold this orbit. Inform Croton. Another circuit in this alignment. Remain at stations."

That was committing them to another thirty-five minutes in their private shells. Dag Fletcher spent his slice of non-recoverable time in reviewing what he had got so far. From the ground, he had believed in a number of possible solutions. After the first run through the actual vectors of circumstance on the site, he believed in one only and that an almost unacceptable one.

When *Interstellar X* ran once more into the critical arc of its orbit, he knew with finality he was right. *Two-Nine* could only have changed course one way. She had dived deeper into the gravisphere of Bromius and spiralled down to an unscheduled and unannounced landfall on that hospitable planet. It made sense in a number of ways. Any other course would have brought her back to the attention of a dozen tracking stations. Croton, with an accepted plot and everything aligned for a straightforward run in, would not expect any deviation and would be unprepared to scramble the finely tuned beam and pick her up afresh on general search. That meant enough time for *Two-Nine* to 'disappear' from their point of view.

That left Bromius control to think about. They were not space minded at all. Only I.G.O. regulations enforced the maintenance of a space port and the lighthouse beam facilities for the interstellar communications network. It was quite likely that the ship had not been plotted at all. Indeed that was the report from Bromius, "No knowledge of this craft."

The planet was largely liquid. Two great oceans filled northern and southern hemispheres, leaving a continuous, equatorial girdle of low lying fertile land with a climate basically similar to that of the Florida coast. Small though it was as a planet, that meant a lot of ocean. *Two-Nine* would certainly be impossible to trace if she had come down in the sea.

Only seconds of tolerance remained for a change of course on this orbit. He could hold the alignment and follow round another time or work something out in split-second haste. Superimposed on the tiny, familiar noises

of the control cabin was another one, which decided the action. The slicing swish of an opening hatch triggered off a line of thought which followed so fast as to seem to be spread out, instantaneously, in time, cause and effect, stimulus and argument and decision present at once.

Of course he must go down now, and in haste. That was what Walker did. The hatch had opened. Something had caused him to alter direction unexpectedly. Doing the same, they might follow his path. The corvette, with its immense power ratio, could even penetrate an atmosphere and change course to move out without a landfall.

"Stand by for major course change." Dag left it as long as he could. After all, Walker would have to be persuaded; that must have taken some time. Let Scullion work it out then. "Number One. Leave this alignment. Set us up to home on Bromius. Now it is."

Jim Scullion proved his worth. He had less cause to know the capabilities of the corvette; but there was no hesitation as he snapped his team into what could be suicidal action.

"Home on Bromius. Check. Stand by. Power. Retro. Full. Now."

Deceleration was fierce. Before the effect was fully developed, Scullion had the new course. "Take this Navigation." He reeled off figures, confirming the ticker tape which Hobbs had already processed. Urgent bleeps told their tale of approaching crisis. At the precise micro second, he was feeding in forward thrust and *Interstellar X* came round, dipping her nose to a new target. Then she was accelerating away.

"One to Commander. Bromius course set."

"Thank you Number One. Stand down."

The arrival of Tamar Kelly in pale blue pants and tunic top with a motif of acanthus leaves, reminded him that he was still on duty. She set her vile dog on the computer presentation shelf. There was no wonder Sinclair tried to ditch it. Every new pose it found gave a fresh dimension to depravity. Chiefly it settled for a kind of tired lechery. If ever there was a symbol of canine decadence this was it.

Speculation that good luck carried a high price tag was cut short by the gentle voice of Bromius control tower. It would be hard to find anywhere else in the galaxy where an official, working to micro seconds, found time to use a kind of old world courtesy. Some of the less sympathetic commanders had been driven to the point of maniacal fury by it.

Dag Fletcher answered in the same vein. He had found that it actually expedited business to play it their way. On the internal net, he alerted Tamar Kelly to work out a landing plot on the data. Courtesy was all right; but he would prefer to rely on his own staff for the complexities of landing.

She had it done in a commendable rush of deft, precise movement and inspired calculation. It differed from the Bromius figures by enough to send *Interstellar X* on a tunnelling bid through the planet's mantle. Fletcher simply passed over both sets of figures with, "Pass your version into Navigation, Tamar. Tell Bromius where they're wrong later."

Dave Sinclair said, "Whether there is a later depends entirely on them being wrong. There may just be time to wring that dog's neck."

For Fletcher it was a simple decision. Either you trusted your crew or you did not. If you did, that was the end of it. But he was at the receiving end of a very high-powered, pleased smile, which put the affair in a credit balance. Besides, by an intuition born of more landfalls than he liked to count, he sensed a rightness in her calculations which was justification in itself.

There was no doubt left, as they spiralled in, that *Two-Nine* must have come this way. Perhaps a similar plotting error from Bromius control was the simple answer to the whole problem. It could be that everyone was being too subtle. If the ship had buried itself in one of the low hills surrounding the port, there would be no survivor and very little of the ship to bother about. With all their charm, the people were realists. Nothing would bring the dead to life, so why go through a face-losing rigmarole of enquiry into the efficiency of their operators? Moreover if his reconstruction was correct, it was a last minute course

change and would be known to be so. They would be bomb proof if they stuck to a story of nothing seen.

So there was no mystery except the mystery of a concealed blunder? For a moment, he thought he had it clear; but then the other facts crowded back. There was certainly something phoney about the last minute course change itself. The whole expedition had to be explained. It was too much to clear up in one mathematical error.

A gentle and rather chiding voice was going on about the final course they were taking. He stifled an impulse to use basic Saxon and hurriedly substituted a diplomatic patter of communications jargon which said the same thing in sales packing. The ship was approaching re-entry. A *stations* call brought the senior personnel to their desks. Tamar, on the way out, left him her dog. She thoughtfully strapped him in an equipment rack beside the chart spread; so that his world-weary jowls rested on its shining top. Then she was gone and the cabin seemed to revert to monochrome.

Sinclair gave it a shrewd jab as he passed and got a malevolent sneer from its mobile features. He said, "There's one comfort. Anything as evil as that must be indestructible."

It was pure pleasure to land the corvette. Years of the careful precision necessary in freight and passenger ships had dimmed the memory of what it was like to take down a craft with this power weight ratio. Even the stolid Holdbrook was beginning to fidget, before he called, "Power. Retro. Now." And steadied the falling, silver pencil above an empty pad.

He took her down so that she sank to within a foot of the full, telescoping depth of her tripod. Then, as she slowly rose back, he was saying on the closed circuit, "Commander to net. On no account, NO ACCOUNT, should the ship be vacated. At all times a watch detail will remain on board. I shall be going through normal quarantine procedures. Power two and Communications two will accompany me ashore. Number One, maintain a round the clock watch. Remember, you have power here to destroy this planet. Do not accept an order to vacate the ship even if it comes from me."

Scullion's correct, "Co-Pilot to Commander, Check and out" left the air vacant again. Fletcher went on, "As soon as the cooling gantry is clear I want the scout car run out. See to it Power Two."

"Power Two to Commander. Check and out."

From the complex of buildings, a kilometre distant, something like a cortège appeared to be setting out. Wheeled transport was still extensively used on Bromius and wide, low, open cars loaded with flowers, had begun to string out from the receptional area. Dag could feel the unreality of the situation beginning to grip him. It would be like trying to find a murderer in a kindergarten.

He decided that he would not allow a welcoming deputation of *leis* bearers aboard the ship. It would thwart a number of aspiring hostesses; but until he was sure about the mission, it could not be helped. Gauges showed a steady drop in outside temperature as billowing clouds of heavy grey gas damped the thermal agitation. It was marginally suitable to break out the scout car. Dave Sinclair came on the net.

"Power Two to Commander. Car standing by."

Dag was already easing out the seals of his space suit. "Commander to net. Stand down. I am leaving now. Thank you, Dave. Ceremonial rig for the shore party. Out."

The slow moving procession was halfway to the ship, when its small tender put out. It circled the ship once and came away, hovering twelve feet above ground with an I.G.O. commission pennant straining stiffly back. The three occupants, in ceremonial dress, sat two in front and one alone behind. Its canopy was back and the Bromusians could see the white uniformed figure of a dark, powerful young man at the controls. Beside him, a vivid, shining gold head and the top half of the green and gold tabard worn by women in the Space Corporation service. In the rear, a tall, angular man, whose age was difficult to assess. Uniform of a Commander. Hair greying slightly above the ears. Eyes, when the car bore down on them, of a penetrating steel grey.

Dave put them level with the leading car, which contained the port superintendent and two brilliantly dark

hostesses wearing pale pink, sari-like garments. In accordance with the custom of the place, these draped the right shoulder and exposed the left side to the waist, where they gathered in a narrow silver chain to fall in seemingly casual pleats to knee length.

Dag said, "Commander Fletcher, I.G.O. detail. *Interstellar X*, Earth Space Corporation." A formal opening gambit, which he might well have saved, since it made no particular impression at all.

Gentle lilting voices, making the Earth language sound like an exotic dialect went through the elaborate formulae of welcome. *Leis* were transferred by delicate, fragile-looking hands. The total impression given was that they had waited all their lives for the rare pleasure of welcoming these three strangers.

It would have been churlish to persist in the official line. Dag resigned himself to the inevitable and joined in the phatic exchanges. He noticed that Tamar Kelly was less madly keen than Sinclair. Her eye, when he chanced to meet it, held an expression of something like disbelief. No doubt, she was feeling over-dressed and even at a disadvantage. Certainly competition was fierce. It would be interesting to see how she made out. Then he noticed two limp, protruding black paws appearing over the rim of the equipment tray. She was taking no chances, she had brought her lucky dog.

Ritual of welcome or not, Dag made it crystal clear that the ship was out of bounds. As a gesture, he transferred to the leading car and allowed himself to be garlanded. Then he sat between the two dark, smiling girls and gave up the unequal battle. There would be time to get round to the main issue.

Perfume, with a faint harmonic of Sandalwood; pale ivory, petal soft skin; on his right, a bare round breast, nudging pneumatically against his arm; technologically, they might be backward; but in human relationships they had an awareness which was like mind reading. The girl sensed his interest and took his hand and placed it without hesitation where his eye had rested. Courtesy could go no further. It was a kind of total willingness to oblige.

Then he remembered more about the people. They were

completely free from any sexual coquetry. Clothes were strictly for decoration rather than concealment. There was seemingly no compulsive interest in sex at all, only an unruffled acceptance. Visitors, who still had that interest, might be indulged as one would a child.

He withdrew his hand, careful to make it clear that this involved no lack of appreciation and asked her name.

"Osyth, Commander. If it pleases you."

"Have you been attached to the space port for long?"

"I have had the pleasure of meeting visitors to our planet for the last six months."

That would certainly cover the period of *Two-Nine's* loss. He said, "Have you met many Earth ships? You speak the language very well."

"Thank you. It is very kind of you to compliment me. We on Bromius find it easy to learn languages. We have many shortcomings; but that is one thing we really do well. Thirza, my companion, can become fluent in a new language in only two or three weeks. There is no credit in it. It is a kind of gift."

The linguist said nothing. It could well be that she knew many languages and had nothing to say in any one of them. But she was decorative enough for it to be only a fringe matter.

At reception, they received V.I.P. treatment. Every procedure was smoothed and expedited. Quarantine regulations in respect of Earth personnel were minimal. Checks were made in a blue and white, clinically clean ante room, by a young doctor, whose liquid brown eyes opened with frank delight at Tamar Kelly.

The ancient people of Bromius had long passed the time of discrete ethnological types. There was only one race now, with only marginal deviations of size and colouring. They were small. Men averaging about five feet seven, women about five feet two. Lightly, delicately built. Pale skinned, black haired, with dark brown eyes.

Tamar was outside experience. But above all, she got a sensational press, because of her dog. She carried him, drooping his depraved head on his paws, over her arm. The doctor transferred his eyes from her hair to see what she was carrying with some polite aim of offering to take it.

But his hand dropped to his side and he said in the first direct question they had yet heard, "What is that?"

Tamar was fairly used to him making an impression. She said, "It's my lucky dog."

"Lucky Dog?"

"A kind of mascot, a charm."

"It is not very charming, that one. What is it called?"

"It hasn't got a name."

"Why not?"

"A name would impose limits on its personality. Once you name a thing you put it in a kind of box."

"That is a very interesting observation. But a box would be no bad thing for him."

On Bromius, that was tantamount to open abuse. Love me love my dog was written into the constitution.

Dag Fletcher entered the conversation with a round-about probe. "This quick, quarantine routine is very convenient. Do you have many Earth visitors coming through?"

The doctor had recovered enough social poise to say, "Not as many as we would wish, of course. Consult the register. There perhaps you will be gratified to see the name of some acquaintance."

He had not virtually changed the subject as Osyth had done earlier, but there was obviously not much point in looking.

Half an hour later, they were free to press on, down the broad tree-lined avenue which went in a dead straight line over undulating open country to the metropolis of Tragaside. It followed the straight line which is the shortest distance between two points; so there would have been no advantage in using the scout car's overland capabilities. In the event, outriders on three wheel scooters carried on the V.I.P. service, three in front and two behind, with sirens hitting a musical, melodious note which took all the urgency out of their warning.

Tragaside was set in a shallow bowl amongst low hills. Four arterial roads left its central, circular piazza and divided the city into mathematically equal quadrants. Concentric ring avenues, tree lined and spacious, gave circulation facility. It was a simple plan, but carried through with

great attention to detail. From the seventh ring out from the centre, private traffic was excluded. Servicing tenders carried out all necessary chores in the two hours before dawn. This dropped the pace of moving to an agreeable saunter, but the small convoy was allowed through. Quietly, busy crowds parted, making a colourful backdrop against a cyclorama of curved terracing in the local pale brown stone.

Of all the planets, Bromius was most like home to Earth personnel. Home plus. As if a new Golden World had arrived and every kind of good had come to fruition.

Mosaics in blue and gold floored the piazza. Fountains and trees, statuary and garden walks, a setting aesthetically worthy of the elegant people who moved gracefully about it. Then they were going between low walls, decorated with a continuous frieze of gazelles and lotus flowers to an oval courtyard and the blank, amber wall of the guest house.

Tamar turned quickly to speak to Dag and her hair expended this centrifugal acceleration by surging on like an elastic gold tide.

"Where's the door?"

"Very discreet. There's little show to the outside. Houses here look inward. Usually to an elaborate inner court. Not an unreasonable thing. It was the same anywhere in the East, years ago, on our planet."

"What have they to hide?"

"Not much one would say."

She gave him a look which plainly accused him of sharing a one track mind with the chauffeur; but it was Dave, that bearded and heavily garlanded young man, who was at the receiving end of, "It's a minor miracle that we've arrived here at all. Our driver has been looking everywhere except ahead."

She lifted out her dog and draped it casually over the entry port rim. The minute vibrations of the idling power pack communicated a kind of life to its mobile, blood-shot eyes. The attendant, about to open the door for her, drew back his hand as if he had been bitten by an adder.

Below a transparent canopy, a section of stone slid aside to reveal a tall, bronze grille and beyond it a flight

of shallow steps. As the grille rose silently, like a portcullis, three smiling girls, in fine, transparent linen tunics with narrow gold belts, appeared, walking slowly towards them; coming down the staircase as if it were a continuous ramp.

Dag only half remembered the place. Their rooms, in a connecting suite, were approached by a wide verandah which overlooked the central court. Floor to ceiling windows on this side had a local variant of the Venetian blind; thousands of pivoting leaf shapes in a variety of pastel shades. Now they were fully open and the rooms were flooded with the pink tinged sunlight peculiar to the planet.

Tamar's room was equipped with every cosmetic device that any woman traveller from any part of the galaxy had ever required and some were bizarre. In fact, she was reacting to the aura of feminine charm by going further along the line towards suffragette independence. She stood her lucky dog amongst the delicate paraphernalia of the oldest art and felt, rightly, that he cut it all down to size. Bromusian clothing was laid out for her inspection. She wisely decided, however, that she was more effectively flamboyant in her masculine tabard. She had no inferiority complex about her own Maillol figure nor any prudish reluctance about displaying it; but in this instance, she had an instinctive understanding that she could not wear this clothing with the right effect.

The bed was a huge oval, solid to the floor in a two foot depth of cunning upholstery. It would be a considerable delight in itself after the narrow functional limits of a dual purpose acceleration couch. The only entrance was from the verandah. An archway, screened by hanging lines of ivy leaves in gold and silver, led to a large, well appointed bathroom, with a sunken bath in the shape of a scallop shell.

Less extravagant, but equally comfortable, Fletcher and Sinclair found that their quarters shared a bathroom. They too had no other entrance than the one to the verandah. When they reached it, some fifteen minutes later, showered and refreshed, wearing fine linen tunics and narrow trousers, and smoking the long black cigarettes which had been provided amongst the dressing table fitments, they

found Tamar already present, standing straight by the balustrade and watching the few people currently using the courtyard.

Dave said tactlessly, "When in Rome. What's all this Tamar, why aren't you showing your public spirit?"

She was some seconds in sorting out which of two possible cutting replies to make and the opportunity passed with the arrival of a messenger with a silver salver. His mission was with Fletcher, but he gave her a deep and almost reverential bow, which mollified her somewhat, before coming to the main issue.

It was an invitation, which could almost be called a summons, to present themselves at Dusk 1 at the Presidential Lodge. The communiqué was hand written and from Madoc himself. It contained a personal note, recalling that Fletcher was not forgotten from his previous visits and a wish that they would enjoy their present stay.

Tamar said, "Dusk 1?"

Before Dag could answer, the messenger was in courteous spate. "It is, unfortunately, sometimes confusing for visitors; but we calculate the daytime hours from Sunrise, one to ten, and the hours of darkness from dusk. One to ten again. I will bring you a conversion chronometer if you wish."

"No thank you. I can work that out."

"Since all the inhabited land is on the equator, and day and night are equal in length, it is more convenient here than it would be elsewhere."

"I can see that. Thank you."

"It was a privilege to be able to explain it to you."

"I am glad you are glad."

"Pardon?"

"Don't give it another thought."

When they presented themselves in the Presidential drawing room, after almost suffocating help from the guest house staff and the use of a fantastically large, wheeled limousine, they found only a girl waiting to meet them. As an ambassadress at large, she could well have been taken as presenting the quintessential graces of the Bromusian idea. Slim to the point of fragility, oval face in the

most exact, classical proportions, dark brown hair, cunningly interwoven with gold and platinum thread, wearing the revealing dress with such demure modesty that it seemed utterly natural, she had Dave Sinclair's full attention from the start.

He was so preoccupied that he, alone, failed to notice Madoc's arrival and her light touch of his arm brought him round to catch the President's, "I see you have met my daughter already. Commander Fletcher, I know. Vanora, introduce me to your other guests."

It was a chastening experience for Tamar. Not for some years had she found herself virtually ignored in male company. Fletcher did his best, recognising the slow fuse that was being lit; but Madoc kept him busy with his courtly flow of question and speculation. Dave Sinclair was virtually withdrawn from circulation. He could only watch Vanora with a kind of hypnotised stare.

On the way back, after a long silence, Tamar said, "I simply do not believe it." Dave was still too stunned for ordinary speech; so Dag said, "What's that, Tamar, what don't you believe?"

"Nobody can be that perfect. She's a phoney."

"Who is this?"

"Vanora. All of them for that matter. They're too good to be true."

"You're not the first to say that."

"So. You believe it?"

"I have an open mind." In the soft glow of the limousine interior, her hair was like a primary source of light. "Be generous, however. There is no one else on this planet with hair as beautiful as yours. They have to have some virtues to make up."

"You're falling into their ridiculous jargon."

"No, truly."

Ten minutes after arrival, it was to Dag's room she came with her complaint. In a short, translucent, turquoise shift she appeared in the open doorway.

"I knew they were phoney."

"Come in and tell me all."

"My dog's gone. Some creepy Bromusian has taken my lucky dog."

It was some minutes after she had gone, that he realized she must have changed specially to tell him that.

III

Three weeks, Earth calculation, with several visits to the ship and some conducted tours in the environs of Tragaside, added almost nothing to the file. Scrambled messages from Space H.Q. relayed by I.G.O. were beginning to take on a querulous note. It was costing a great deal in hard cash and in key personnel to keep *Interstellar X* standing on its Bromusian pad.

Two other ships came and went in a flurry of greeting and farewell. Freighters both, bringing in infrangom, a metal not present on the planet and taking out ingots of maenite which had become important in circuits where zero resistance was required.

High and low level enquiries produced only elaborate concern that Tamar's lucky dog was gone. Dave Sinclair put himself finally out beyond the pale by saying that he believed it was about the best thing that could have happened, since he would not have liked Vanora to see it. She would have received a totally wrong impression of European decadence.

Tamar said nothing, a silence which was lost on the acolyte, but her expressive, golden brown eyes made Dag a present of her opinion.

Ubiquitous service amounted to total surveillance. It was done without any apparent ulterior motive, but it was impossible to be free from a well wishing attendant. Dave Sinclair was now spending a great deal of his time with Vanora. He was anxious not to step out of line, duty wise, but there was nothing else specifically to ask him to do; so Dag let him get on with it. In fact, in the situation they were in, it was a possible lead. She would know if *Two-Nine* had been here. Not that Dave was likely to beat any information out of her. Total charm seemed to have unmanned him.

Then Dag got away in the scout car. Sinclair had an afternoon date at the Lodge. Tamar came moodily along the verandah to see what was going on ; the guest house was silent. Their car had been brought through into the central court and was parked beside a fountain. A request for the gate to be opened would bring a cloud of attendants and the outriders as escort.

He said, "Walk down into the courtyard and dig around in the car as if you were looking for something. I'll join you in a minute."

She cheered up immediately and was off. One satisfactory thing about Tamar was that she never made delays or objections.

Standing out of direct view, he watched her carry out a convincing charade and looked round windows on three sides to see if anyone else was watching. Sure enough, a young man came casually out and stood looking down. His face had the lines of smiling desire to please, which was the standard feature ; but if you discounted that, it was possible to count 'it as watchfulness. After a few moments, he withdrew and Dag went out and down with deceptively fast strides.

He slipped into the pilot seat and saw with satisfaction that she was in beside him without waiting for it to be spelled out. He had circled the fountain twice in a rising spiral, before the young man reappeared. He was no longer smiling and appeared genuinely grieved, as though he had been denied an opportunity to do a good deed. The car was rising now at full thrust and levelled with the shallow pitched roof. Then they were crossing it and planing down into the square.

It was almost empty at this time ; Dag dropped to ten feet and crossed in the direction of the main avenue going north. The few people looked more surprised than anything.

Tamar said, "They look different. Is it because there are no officials with us?"

"They are certainly not used to seeing foreigners about in their own transport. Transport of any kind, just here, for that matter. There's nothing sinister about that."

Looking back, he could see no one in sight and took

the next circular link road to the right. Blank walls of houses made it a shallow brown canyon. He pulled in under trees and they both looked back. On a count of twenty, six outriders went past the end of their turning with a greater burst of speed than would have been expected.

Dag went along at ground level, as if they had wheels. They were less obtrusive like that and could mingle with normal traffic on the outer rings. There was not much about. Bromusians in spite of their delicate build were mainly walkers, transport was a functional thing for moving loads and inter-city travel.

Once beyond the perimeter, Dag notched up the speed. There was probably nothing on wheels which could catch the scout car. In any event, he left the road and crossed trimly laid out farmland with neat, well-kept hedges and brown stone farmhouses. Each city had this ring of cultivated land, very fertile, producing three annual crops of a staple food grain almost like barley; with miniature gazelle-like cattle on semi-intensive organization for milk and meat.

Dag was conscious that he was wasting his time. There was nothing to see except patient, even painstaking, industry. If he had any remote idea that, somewhere out of the city, he would find the twisted hulk of *Two-Nine*, or a rocket ship shaped depression, this was the corrective. But he went on, out of the cultivated belt and over the low hills into the wilderness which lay between the centres of population.

The road sliced through, straight as a die, elaborately protected from becoming overgrown by wide ditches, which scraped down to the bare rock and allowed no foothold for the most vigorous creeper. After a ten mile run out, Dag was prepared to turn back. He took in a fresh vista of jungle in a wide turning sweep, twenty feet above the tree tops and was accelerating away when Tamar's hand on his arm directed him to look her side.

Tumbled hummocky remains covered a wide area, lying either side of a line which connected with the distant road-way.

"Can we go down?"

He reduced speed until they were merely hovering and took a long look. Then he edged sideways, until a gap showed up directly beneath. They went down like an elevator into a small clearing with the blowers creating a whirlwind.

She was beginning to appreciate having a top brass chauffeur. Where some people would have debated and bothered about the feasibility, he simply did it.

The ground was clear, because the thrusting vegetation had not yet managed to carve up a thick floor of black granite. The sweeping draught had bared it for inspection. Dag edged the tender under the trees to see it whole. Incised grooves made a diagrammatic lay-out reminiscent of a stellar plot.

Tamar said, "It's a planetary system."

A leaf symbol on the centre sphere had a familiar appearance. Dag said slowly, "It's the Bromius set-up. Six moons almost equidistant."

"What's this then?" She was standing over a seventh circle which seemed to dominate the design. Alone of the subsidiary circles, it had a pattern of leaves and its orbit was suggested by a continuous spiral path of tiny leaves like a dotted line.

"The pilotage manual makes no mention of a seventh moon. And that orbit would be a rarity in any system."

"Who provides details for the manual?"

"In an advanced culture, the local people. Otherwise a survey team. But there would be no advantage in suppressing any detail."

"It could be a mythological thing or an early attempt to explain something. Anybody looking at a Ptolemaic map would get some queer ideas about Earth."

"True. But the rest looks very accurately observed. Let's take a look further in."

They crossed the roadway. It was only a quarter within the width of the arterial road. Below the trees it now looked like a long straight culvert leading out to a distant T junction.

Tamar went on all fours to get a good look at its surface in the dim light. "It's perfect. It isn't overgrown a bit. This could still be in use."

"To go where? It ends here."

"Not just here; we could follow it along to its end."

"Right."

They went in silence along the centre of the paved way. It was as she said, clear and swept as if in use. For a hundred yards there was nothing. Overgrown mounds made ridges and burrows only partly visible on either side. Then they were in a clearing.

Its floor was of black granite. The planet theme was repeated, with wider grooves that were almost like a drainage system to take water from the place. Trees, growing from excavated openings which followed a careful geometric plan, seemed designed to give a camouflage to the area. From above it, would hardly be recognizable as a great open space. But that was the impression from below. In the centre, beneath a huge tree, encircling it in fact, like a black collar, was a ring of smooth basalt, with the moons of Bromius in relief and the seventh moon with its unconventional orbit in blood red.

In spite of its relatively open aspect, there was an oppressive feeling about the place. Tamar, who was very susceptible to atmosphere, had taken his hand, like a child automatically seeking support. It was so naturally done, that it was a kind of compliment; though, ever inclined to self-doubt in these affairs, Dag had a wry thought, that he might now be cast in the role of a father figure. Her words did something to check this morbid regression. "Isn't it strange. Who would have thought that I would be walking hand in hand with you in a dark wood. Averil would be madly jealous."

Then she was hurrying him forward to the centre and looking at the basalt centrepiece. The mathematics of it began to make a pattern. She was quicker than Fletcher to see where it led.

"This rogue moon would only be visible from the equatorial belt for a short period every forty days or so. It would be very curious to watch. If its speed approached the speed of revolution of the planet it might give the impression of being fixed in elevation and azimuth."

"I don't see why it hasn't got onto the pilotage charts. Ships are in and out of here all the time."

"Who fixes the timing schedules?"

"Bromius control has to be consulted. It's a sovereign planet with an I.G.O. negotiated charter."

"So ; they could have arranged times which avoided the relevant moon phase."

"For nearly a century?"

"I wouldn't put anything sneaky past them. Somebody took my dog. Another thing. . . ."

"Yes?"

"If this orbital plan is to scale and makes an accurate picture, mathematically, it would be a very local phenomenon. In fact it might only be visible on a very narrow band of this equatorial belt."

"As here for instance."

"This road might follow the line of its movement. It might appear to be stationary over this tree."

"Take a look inside."

He stood back to the ten foot basalt wall and made a stirrup. She was up in a lithe spring and a warm thigh pressed against his cheek. He was tempted to give it an experimental bite ; but a lifetime of putting business before pleasure won out.

Her voice came down, muffled as she leaned into the hollow, between the wall and the tree. "There's a platform, about three feet down. It's a bit dim. Something like straw hats. Surely not. Yes. I've got one. Conical, with a small brim ; definitely plaited straw. Small version of a Welsh national costume thing ; but white. Well, white and dirty brown. There are nine of them. Chains too. Lots of chains. Seem to have one end stapled to the tree and one end shackled on a hoop."

Suddenly her weight was gone as she leaned further over the rim. Then a very indignant, "My dog's here. What do you think about that? Somebody's thrown my lucky dog in here."

She was down again. Slipping between his steadyng arms, clutching the black puppet. Its fuck had tended to run out, since one of its cunningly articulated forelegs had been wrenched off.

She had not disengaged herself from his grip and leaned momentarily against him in a total statement of form

from knees to shoulders. It was a final purging of the father figure image, which had troubled him and his hands went up to hold her head under a cushion of tawny silk hair.

Once again the business principle made an issue of it. He said, "Put it back."

"My lucky dog?"

"Yes."

She was looking directly into his eyes and must have understood that argument would get her nowhere. She pitched it back in an overarm throw which carried her hand behind his head in its follow through.

"Dag?"

"Here."

"I've been thinking."

"You are a very talented girl."

"Seriously. The periodicity of this moon thing might be critical."

"I like your mouth when you say that."

"What?"

"Periodicity. And you're quite right. Remember May 29th Earth time as a possible date line. What limits?"

"Between thirty and thirty-three. There are one or two imponderables."

"I was settling for thirty-one at a rough estimate."

They were back in the car. Dag had come to several important conclusions and was thinking out ways of moving ahead. She went on, "Thirty-one is possible."

"Assuming that there has not been an appearance of this moon so far in our visit, its next appearance must be imminent. Could in fact be only hours distant."

"Certainly."

"We'll make a detour on the way back and call at the ship. There you stay."

"Please, no. Let me stay with you."

He stopped the car and gave her his full attention.

"Nothing derogatory in this. I'd just as soon have you with me as any other member of the crew from the action point of view. Sooner, of course, from every other. But this

may well hinge on a communications issue. There are some calculations which need your special skill. Right?"

She looked suspiciously into his eyes, as though probing for some other truth behind the words; but plainly there was none. It was as the man said. She capitulated grudgingly. "If you're sure."

Homing at seventy-five feet, *Interstellar X* was a needle pointer amongst the hills beyond the town. He went overland, pushing the car's speed up until the strip dial was cluttered with red numerals. Tamar's hair was straight back, like a golden version of the I.G.O. pennant. Speed was trifling compared with the speeds they normally used; but, here, they were in direct contact with it and it was a special pleasure.

Jim Scullion had the hangar ready for reception and they zeroed on its beam, with the automatic pilot taking them in like a flung stone.

Dag clipped into an internal circuit and spoke from the car. "Get everybody into control, Jim. We have something to move on."

Long periods of waiting were a norm of the service and frustration tolerance was high; but there was no doubt that a move was welcome. At first there was polite incredulity. Averil Marr was particularly sceptical.

By some intuitive understanding she knew that there had been a personal involvement between them. She was inclined to categorize the moon theory as Tamar's Folly. She set up the miniature planetarium to show that it could not happen. Tamar took characteristic fixes for the six recorded moons and, working from the hypothesis that a seventh could have a spiral orbit, showed exactly where that path would be.

Randle Hobbs took a long look at the figures and gave a reluctant assent. "It's possible. There's only one thing wrong."

Fletcher said, "What's that, Randle?"

"Nobody has ever seen it. Anybody can weave an orbital path anywhere at all; but that doesn't say a solid object will ever follow it."

"That's just too bad. Because you've got about twelve

hours to find it. I'm going back to have a straight talk with Madoc. It won't do any immediate good. Whatever is behind all this is too deep seated to be exorcized by a conversation. But he deserves to know where he stands. As soon as I've gone, you can blast off. I'll tell them that you are coming back for us in about five weeks. This is what you will do."

He was ten minutes telling them succinctly what they would do. When he had finished, there was a silence.

"Any questions?"

It was too clear and simple to require any further detail; but Scullion had one and his seriousness showed by a reversion to formality. "Your role, Commander?"

"Yes?"

"You seem to have baited a trap with yourself. You would be better fitted than I am to take the ship on this mission. I ask permission to go ashore instead of you."

"Nicely phrased, Jim, and thank you; but no. It goes the way I have said. It's very much a communications' job. You, Randle and Tamar are the key people in this. I'm relying on you. Let's get on then."

Tamar joined him briefly at the hangar. Then he was moving out, with a memory of fine gold hair, perfume and warm lips to shore against his ruins, whilst his surface mind tackled the immediate and less satisfactory problem of how to proceed with Madoc.

In the event, decision was to some extent taken from him. An immigration official, with the universal charm fraying into a querulous concern, was at the guest house.

"And where is your beautiful companion?"

"She is going back in the ship. There is a matter come up at Fingalna. They are going there and will return for Sinclair and myself in a few weeks."

"You are staying here then?"

It was difficult to see whether the man was pleased or alarmed at the prospect.

"Yes. There is no difficulty about that is there?"

"Of course not. Naturally we are delighted that you should want to extend your stay."

They had reached the verandah and the unmistakable distant hiss of a rocket ship leaving its pad made a period

to his doubtful enthusiasm. He stood still and his face dropped momentarily into lines other than the habitual creases of delight. Dag found himself reflecting that 'a man may smile and smile and be a villain'. Closely considered this universal trait could be no more than a rictus, a nervous tick. The deep brown eyes were unfathomable in their expression.

"Your ship has not waited for clearance." It was more a statement than a question and the man was gone, with the shortest leave-taking Dag had experienced on Bromius.

He made up for it by coming back like a yo-yo before Dag had got himself under the shower.

"The President would like to see you at once." There was no mistaking, this time, that it was an official summons from a head man in his own backyard. *Interstellar X* with its punitive armament was out of sight and probably out of communications range from the scout car, which was purely an atmosphere craft.

Dag preserved the niceties which were in danger of eclipse. "That is very kind of him. I will be with you in no time at all." He went on with leisurely preparations and the man was clearly finding it hard to take. When they finally reached the entrance, the scout car was not in sight and a large hearse-like limousine with two attendants was waiting in its place.

"Your patrol craft has been taken through into the courtyard. There are garage spaces below the verandahs."

Locked no doubt. That would stop any sightseeing tours without alerting an escort.

"Thank you. That was very kind."

"Not at all."

Madoc was alone. He was obviously waiting for an explanation. Dag said, "President, you know the I.G.O. code. You know that I am here on I.G.O. authorization. We are investigating the loss of *Interstellar Two-Nine*. I believe more is known of this than has been reported. The ship was here."

It was, in fact, more than he knew. But it could be so. Madoc countered with a question. "Where has your ship gone?"

"To Fingalna; to trace the last course of *Two-Nine* once

more, from there. But I am satisfied that it came here. Without being harsh, I know your space port personnel. They are not first-class operators. Wrong directions could have been given, which ended in a loss of the ship on this territory. Someone perhaps started a face-saving operation, then the whole community was involved in a cover-up. That is understandable and not a criminal act. All I want is the truth."

"You are not in a position to demand anything at all."

It was abundantly clear now that the deployment of facial muscle in an ingratiating smile was a surface phenomenon only. Madoc's eyes were not involved in it and his voice carried something like a civil sneer.

A light step behind him brought Vanora onto the set. It had taken an effort of will not to turn; but the skin was crawling between his shoulder blades. There was no doubt now about the atmosphere. The chips were down.

He said, "Where is Sinclair?"

Madoc said, "You have still not understood. It no longer matters as far as you are concerned, but you were partially correct. The ship came in on a wrong course. It was not making for the space port at all. We were able to deflect its own course calculators. We are not quite as ignorant in these matters as you supposed. It is some miles off shore in very deep water. You are wrong in supposing that this was an accident. We knew the purpose of its mission. Our agents in Fingalna picked it up when the project was in the planning stage. The ethnology people forced your crew to take this action. Few people were concerned and those will have been silenced one way or another. We have no reason to believe that it will be repeated."

"My ship will be back."

"You yourself do not know the purpose of the first expedition. You may have been near it. Do not underestimate us. I.G.O. will be satisfied with the report they get."

So it was in the open. All except the reason behind it all, and that was taking a tenuous shape. If the ship was in the sea there was no point in making any further play in the hope of saving personnel. There was Dave

Sinclair of course; but nothing could be done about that. He had reached the point of decision when Madoc said, "Frankly, Commander, I advise against it. You might as well preserve what dignity a fool can have."

But Dag was already moving, at a tangent, to an opening to the left of the President from which he had seen food carried in on more social occasions. He did not, in fact, reach it. With two strides to go, he was brought down. There was a soft hiss and a ball of pale mauve mist enveloped his head. As he fell forward, he thought that he certainly had underestimated Madoc. There was enough thought-reading in that last remark to warrant a re-assessment in itself. His mind flooded from edge to edge with pure blue colour and his last conscious impression was of acanthus leaves forming three dimensionally on this background.

Dag Fletcher believed he was blind. Eyes open or closed saw only black. Then he knew it was night, that he was sitting in the open with his back to a smooth hard surface. Instinctively he tried to stand and the blackness whirled in deeper circles of more intense darkness; but he persevered, fighting back nausea. Links of chain rattled against his bare legs and he traced it to a circle of metal clamped round his waist.

Channels in the wall identified it for him. It was the basalt collar in the groove. Now pattern asserted itself and the surrounding trees and spaces sorted themselves out against a paler blackness which was the sky.

It was plain enough now. He was some variant of the priest king waiting to be sacrificed. No doubt, the Ethnological Institute had got wind of it, or enough hint to make them curious. They must have known that I.G.O. would have forbidden any interference and indeed possibly sent in one of its own commissions. Hence the roundabout way of setting the thing up.

He was feeling better. Chain clashed nearby and he took a loop in his own line to swing as a weapon. Then he remembered Sinclair. "Dave?"

"Commander?"

There was no time for more. Dead in line with the road

from the grove, the seventh moon of Bromius was appearing, like a stage effect switched on for the denouement. They had seen many planetary systems and many fantastic moons; but this had a quality of its own. It glowed palely, a putrescent corpse colour; it was huge. A peculiarity of its orbit seemed to be flinging it down on a collision course, with the grove as its impact point.

Dag said, "Primitive people would think they had to make some outstanding oblation to exorcize that. But why now? They know better now."

Noise erupted from the roadway. Hemmed in by the acoustic screen of the trees it had been inaudible until now. But the frenzied rabble that burst into the grove had been whipping it up for some time. In the macabre light, the white skins of the Bromusians had a ghastly pallor. They were moving into the grove as if jerked forward by invisible strings: as if a possessing frenzy was being motivated from outside the will.

The leading figures were wearing low-crowned, conical straw hats and narrow belts which carried simply a small sheathed knife. There were nine of them. Young women all. Leaping and twisting with heads flung back and bodies arched in the poses of an extravagant and violent ecstasy.

The crowd filled the grove, leaving a ring round the centre tree and the nine began to circle in. Clearly these were the executioners.

Fletcher and Sinclair had automatically moved apart to give free scope for swinging a loop of chain. Silence fell suddenly as the thick press of watching people waited for the end. One of the girls after a spasm of uncontrollable, furious gyration, began a kind of sobbing scream and hurled herself at Sinclair with the small knife held rigidly at arm's length.

The looped chain caught the side of her face and brought her down. Almost without pause, she was seized by the others and thrown out of the circle into the crowd.

In seconds, she was torn to pieces and the dance began again. But there were still nine. Dag said, "It's like ice hockey. They have a whole bench of reserves. I expect they play injury time as well."

Sinclair was not listening. He had recognized that the

leading maenad was Vanora. Since none of it was concealed, he might have recognized her physical presence before. But the personality change had been considerable. It was she who came in next, in a leaping twisting run, which evaded the clumsy chain and scored a savage hit with her knife, which raised a bright streak from his neck to his left groin. The great crowd gave a kind of corporate sigh.

Now it had to be. The orbit had lessened, so that the next circuit would bring them right in. Vanora was screaming and a pale froth hid her mouth. The move began. Dag wound the double links round his wrist and began a ponderous swing.

Darkness came so suddenly that for a moment it changed nothing. Then the crowd began to wail, a keening, terrified wail, as though the very thing they had been trying to prevent over the centuries had at last overtaken them.

The seventh moon of Bromius had gone out. At the same time, an earth-shaking roar filled the air and a new and intense glare beat down onto the grove.

Interstellar X was searing itself out a burning pad across the exit road. To all intents and purposes, the moon had completed its bid to bury itself in the sacred grove.

Gas wreathed the incandescent ship. Scullion was using its own cooling system to make a quick exit. He had a difficult task before him for a cutting out operation with a small civilian crew.

But the last twelve hours had made the impossible a routine thing. Finding the moon had been like isolating a coracle adrift in the Pacific. Tamar had found it, with an absolute concentration which had turned her into an extension of the computers. Then Holdbrook had produced an engineer's demolition plan for atomic charges in the time it took to make a landfall. The moon had carried its own seeds of destruction for an hour before it came over the grove.

Searchlights blazed a path which spotlighted the tree with its chained guardians. A ramp was dropping below the tripod legs and as it touched down a small caterpillar tracked loading trolley shot away with two bulbous figures in space gear at the controls.

When it reached them, the shorter figure jumped down and ran forward. It was Tamar Kelly, usefully equipped with a hand vibrator, which sheared the chain as if it were cotton thread.

She had first freed Fletcher, which pleased him. Then she went over to Dave Sinclair, who was standing stupidly looking at Vanora. The high priestess had fallen into a shocked coma almost at his feet with a knife still clutched in an extended hand.

Tamar prised open her fingers and pulled it free. Then she gave it to Sinclair. From the depths of her helmet, the voice in the external speaker sounded like Hamlet's father's ghost. She said, "You can keep that as a memento of your girl friend."

Fletcher had reached the top of the basalt collar with a running leap and was searching inside. Then they were on the trolley and whipping back through the grove, with Tamar incongruously clutching her battered but still reasonably lucky dog.

Groups of people were beginning to band together. The madness had gone; but a new serious purpose was there. They could only take suicidal action against the corvette, but they might not know that.

As soon as the ramp began to lift, Dag was issuing orders. He had tilted back Tamar's visor and was using her intercom, a brief but pleasing intimacy in itself. Seconds later, after the fastest sealing up of his career, he was giving the count down.

Fingalna was behind them and it was a routine run home. Tamar Kelly was inclined to want precise answers.

"But suppose I.G.O. finds out that you destroyed a moon, Dag?"

"What they never had will be no loss."

"The ethnological people might make something of it."

"They didn't know much. I can fix them with a confidential tape. You either have your ID taking his share in a rational way or he has to be let out for a gala performance every now and then. This has got to be on a national level."

"Like having a vile lucky dog all the time is better than carving people up occasionally with a little knife?"

"That's about it."

"I didn't thank you for getting my dog back."

"There's plenty of time. But gratitude should never be frustrated. You can start now."

"Like this?"

When he could speak, he said, "That will do very well for a beginning."

— JOHN RANKINE

CRY MARTIAN—*Continued from page 128*

"Henry," she said quietly.

"Yes love," he said, without looking up.

"Henry, I know Timmy has a vivid imagination for his age, and he loves to make up stories" . . . her voice tailed off.

"Well dear?"

"He says he saw some Martians today."

"Did he?"

"He says they chased him."

There was silence. Her husband continued to dig in a smooth, unbroken rhythm.

"Well?" said Timmy's mother.

"Well what dear?"

"Well what do you think of Timmy's story?"

"What do you think?"

"Yes, I know it sounds silly Henry, but he sounded so sincere."

"It's absolutely impossible dear, you know as well as I do that all the Martians were exterminated over twelve years ago."

"Yes, I suppose you're right Henry." She shrugged, and walked back into the house.

Henry laughed, as he dug the spade viciously into the red, dusty soil.

Timmy wasn't back in time for dinner. He wasn't back for tea either. In fact, even by the time night had fallen, and the two huge moons hung like melons in the dark green sky—he still wasn't back.

— PETER L. CAVÉ

The Third in the "Pavane" cycle of stories about an England which might have been.



BROTHER JOHN

by Keith Roberts

The workshop was dim and low-roofed, lit only by a pair of barred and round-topped windows at its farther end. Along the walls of rough-dressed ashlar, stone slabs stood in lines. In one corner of the chamber was a massive sink, fed by crudely fashioned pipes and taps, beside it a bench; there was a faint tang in the air, the raw, sharp smell of wet sand.

At the bench a man was working; he was short and ruddy-faced, slightly portly and robed in the dark crimson of the Adhelmiens. As he worked he whistled between his teeth, faintly and tunelessly. The habit had more than once brought down on the tonsured head of Brother John the disapproval of his superiors; but it was a part of his nature, and unstoppable.

On the bench in front of the monk lay a slab of limestone some three feet long by four or more inches thick. Beside it were boxes of silver sand; Brother John was engaged in grinding the surface of the stone, pouring the sand through wells in a circular iron muller which he afterwards spun with some dexterity, whirling an emulsion of water and abrasive across the slab. The job was both tiring and exacting; when finished, the stone must have no trace of bowing in either direction. From time to time he

checked it for concavity, laying a steel straight-edge across its surface. After some hours the slab was nearing completion, and its most critical stage. The grained texture imparted by the muller must also be free of blemish ; Master Albrecht would be certain to detect any irregularity, and Brother John knew very well what would result. From his scrip the master printer would produce a short steel bodkin, kept for the purpose, and with its tip incise a deep cross on the limestone slab, which it would be John's pleasure to grind away. He had in fact just finished erasing one such *insignium* of the great man's disapproval.

He washed the stone down carefully, employing a length of hose attached to one of the taps. He checked its flatness once more, working delicately, avoiding all contact of his admittedly greaseless fingers. The slightest suspicion of grease, a smudge of fat from the tympan of a press, the brushing of a sweaty hand, would spell disaster ; in fact for their finest work the monks of the lithography section wore linen masks, to avoid contaminating the stones with their breath.

All was in order ; John proceeded, still whistling, to apply the last delicate graining, using for the purpose the finest of the stacked grades of sand. The job was finally done ; a last critical examination of the beautiful creamy surface and he washed the stone down again, leaning it against the wall to swill the grit from its bottom and sides. Then he carried it puffing across the workshop, edged it onto the platform of a small lift set into the thickness of the wall. A tug at the bellpull beside it, a faint answering jangle from above and the object of his labour was drawn smoothly upward out of sight. He tidied his equipment, returning the trays of sand to their labelled shelves and scrubbing down the sink. The floor drain clogged noisily ; he rootled in it with a stick till the last of the water had sluiced away then followed the stone by a twisting staircase to the upper air.

In contrast to the grinding shop, the main litho studio was lofty and bright. Tall windows opened onto a vista of rolling hills, the lush farm country of the Dorset and Somerset border, gay now with April sunshine. Along one wall of the room more stones were stacked ; beside another

a low dais gave to the desk of Master Albrecht a dignity fitting his position. Behind the desk was the door to his diminutive office, a cubicle full to overflowing with bills, invoices, receipts for that and this; beside it another door opened into the ink store, where cans of delicious colour were stacked in rows on slatted pinewood shelves. The ink store too had its distinctive smell, rich and sweet.

In the centre of the room two long white-scrubbed tables were spread with pulls of a current job; round them four of the half dozen novices attached to the department sat patiently, snipping out the work with scissors. Behind the tables, on a second raised plinth, stood the presses; three of them spaced out along the wall, gleaming-clean, Master Albrecht's pride and chief delight.

The machines were simply made. Each bed was lifted to printing height by a tall lever and propelled by a hefty wooden-spoked wheel; over the bed an iron frame supported a leather-covered wedge, adjustable for pressure. A brass tympan, hinged at the farther end of the bed and tensioned by leadscrews along its edges, protected the stone from the wedge. The tympans had on one occasion in the past been the cause of a *contretemps* in which Brother John had figured prominently. They were greased, and had since time immemorial been greased, with a concoction labelled as bearfat but about the composition of which John had expressed the gravest suspicions. In warm weather it stank abominably; and John, to whose sensitive nostrils bad odours were an offence, had taken it on himself to scrounge from the town's one garage a tin of the newfangled mineral grease, with which he had anointed the presses. The rage of Master Albrecht had known no bounds; for several weeks afterward John had had visited on him penances of a peculiarly unpleasant nature, not the least of which had been the removal of the grease and the resubstitution of the time-honoured bearfat. The little Brother had submitted with as good a grace as was possible under the circumstances, though he had vowed privately that were he ever to rise to the dizzy heights of Master of Lithography the noxious compound would be banished utterly from his domain.

Beside the presses were more sinks, and the upper outlet

of the lift from the grinding shop ; by it the stone, approved by Master Albrecht, was propped on its side being fanned dry by a boy armed with a rotating flag of cardboard on a stick. There were wallracks lined with the leather ink rollers, napped and smooth ; beneath them more limestone slabs served as pallettes. At one of them Brother Joseph was working ; a fair-haired novitiate, skull as yet unshaved.

When Brother John entered he was still whistling ; the sound died abruptly, scorched out of existence by Master Albrecht's fiery stare. He threaded his way across the room, stood waiting impatiently while Brother Joseph finished spreading ink and kneading it into a roller. A stone lay ready on the bed of the nearest press, beside it a stack of two-colour pulls. John sponged the slab lightly, dipping water from the bucket alongside the press, stepped back as his assistant advanced with the roller. The image was charged, fed delicately at first then more firmly ; John inverted one of the pulls, slipped through the paper the two needles mounted in paintbrush handles with which the prints were located on the crossed register marks. Then down with the tympan, lift to pressure ; a small adjustment to the wedge and the job rolled through. John released the bed, hauled it back, raised the tympan then more carefully the paper sheet, held the design up to the light. The colours glowed cheerfully ; a drawing of a buxom country girl holding a sheaf of barley, and the inscription '*Harvesters Ale ; brewed under licence at the monastery of Saint Adhelm, Sherborne, Dorset.*'

The ringing of the noon bell put an end to further work ; the monks, freed temporarily from their vow of silence, filed out chattering to the refectory. John and Brother Joseph took their lunches to a corner table, sat apart while they planned out the afternoon's operations ; later they would lack the benefit of the spoken word and note-writing, as well as being tedious, was somewhat frowned on as an evasion.

At two o'clock, as they were rising to return to the litho room, a novice approached bearing a slip of paper. He handed the message to Brother John ; the little monk read it, scratched at his pate, showed it fleetingly to Brother Joseph and rolled his eyes in mock distress. He was

summoned to the august presence of his Abbott; he scurried off revolving in his mind a list of sins both of omission and commission for which he might be being called to account.

A half hour's wait in the great man's antechamber did little to improve his state of mind; John sat and fidgeted and watched the squares of sunlight move across the walls while Master Thomas, the monastery's accountant, alternately fixed him with a coldly accusing stare and inscribed, with a hideously squeaking pen, the endless rolls of parchment on which the records of the Order were kept. At two thirty, Brother John was finally admitted to the presence of his spiritual superior.

Events tended to repeat themselves, Father Meredith reading at length from a file of notes, glancing up from time to time over his square-framed spectacles as Brother John fretted and puffed, red in the face now with concern. John's visits to the *sanctum* had been few, and the memory of them was not on the whole encouraging. His eyes moved restlessly, taking in the remembered details of the room. The Reverend Father's study was less austere in character than the rest of the monastery of Saint Adhelm; a carpet of intricate Persian design covered the floor, one wall was lined with books while in a corner stood a globe of the world supported by a group of handsome bronze zephyrs. On the leather-topped desk more books and papers were piled untidily. There too stood the Abbott's typewriter; a monumental machine, its superstructure framed by Corinthian pillars that ended obnoxiously in cast-iron paws. A cocktail cabinet, its doors partly ajar, displayed well-stocked shelves; a late Renaissance *Pietà* hung above it while over Father Meredith's desk a grisly Spanish Crucifix loomed.

Through the windows could be seen the hills, gentle in sunlight; Brother John moved his eyes from the disquieting Christ-figure, rested them on the horizon. Time passed as he watched the moving clouds, their slow miles-off white billowing; when Father Meredith finally spoke, his voice came as a faint shock. "Brother John," he said. "Something . . . ah . . . interesting has occurred."

John felt a slight rise of hope. Perhaps after all his

Abbott hadn't sent for him to rap his knuckles over some half-forgotten crime. He contrived, as far as his mobile eyebrows would allow, a look of interest combined with a suitably devout submissiveness. The attempt met with a somewhat qualified success. Father Meredith clicked his fingers irritably. "You may speak, Brother. . . ." The Adhelmiens were a mild order of artisans and craftsmen; the daily silence was about their only firm rule but it was adhered to rigidly.

John swallowed gratefully. "Thank you, Reverend Father. . . ." He faltered. At this stage, there was little else to say.

Father Meredith scanned his papers again and cleared his throat; a little distant-sounding noise, sheeplike. "Er . . . yes. It seems we have been asked to supply an . . . ah . . . artist. The whole affair's a little mysterious, I don't know a great deal about it as yet myself; but I felt a . . . change of air shall we say, Brother, might be . . . beneficial. . . ."

Brother John bowed his head humbly. It seemed likely Master Albrecht had had something to do with that last remark; John had never really seen eye to eye with him since the business of the bearfat. And something too in the intonation of the single word 'artist' . . . In matters spiritual, John had always been more than willing to be led; in things aesthetic though, he was constantly guilty of the sin of Pride. "I am entirely," he murmured, "at the Reverend Father's disposal. . . ."

"Hmph," said the Abbott, sharply. He continued for a moment to observe John over the upper rims of his glasses. He was well enough aware of the other's background. John came of poor parents; his family were, and had been for generations, cobblers in Durnovaria. From an early age John had showed no inclination to follow the family trade; set to a last, he would be discovered chalking pictures on the workbench, making furtive crayon sketches of the faces of his brothers and the customers in the little shop. His father had more than once taken a broad strap to the miscreant and endeavoured to knock out Hell and make room for a little Heaven; but the plump little boy, in other respects an amiable and easy-going child, proved unexpectedly stubborn. Chalks or pencils

were seldom out of his hands ; when he could draw with nothing else he used charcoal from the grates or heelball. His pictures and scrawlings lined the rough walls of his room ; his proper work became more erratic than ever. It seemed the only thing to do was to let him follow his bent ; at least, his father reasoned, the family would be relieved of the necessity of feeding a useless mouth. In this England there was only one way in which John's talent might be employed ; he took Holy Orders and at the age of fourteen became a novice in the monastery of Saint Adhelm, some twenty-odd miles from his home.

The first few months were a trying time both for the young pupil and his instructors ; as a working-class child John had naturally never learned to read, and this instead of art became the first concern. The novice sensed finally that only through his letters would he ever achieve his real ambition ; he sweated over his books, and a year later was formally admitted to the classes held in the monastery by Brother Pietro, the drawing master.

Even then John was doomed to disappointment ; life drawing was not permitted, and the young student spent restless hours working from the cast. The antique study improved his line and gave him a measure of discipline he had hitherto lacked, but left him unfulfilled. Lithography had been his salvation ; though at first he loathed its complexity, and the long dry history of it from Senefelder's laundry list onwards that Brother Pietro insisted he learn by heart, the colour and texture of the stones and the many ways of working them appealed to the latent craftsman in him. While fine art was seldom required, there was technical challenge in the most mundane commercial jobs ; John worked diligently, restyling over the years the entire range of bottle and package labels produced by the House. Master Albrecht, recognizing if not a genius at least a first-rate craftsman, left him largely to his own devices, and by his thirtieth birthday John had become well-known in professional circles. (He sometimes referred to himself, with wry humour, as the Master of the Bottle of Sauce). Brewing was only one of the industries in which the Church had extensive interests, and commissions began to come in from other centres and ecclesiastic business

houses lacking their own creative staff. The subsequent swelling of the coffers of the Adhelmiens had been the main reason why John's occasional outbursts of temperament had been tolerated without too much complaint, even by the peppery Master of Lithography. John was a good draughtsman and, let to go his own way, a keen worker ; these qualities the Adhelmiens had always valued more than slavish obedience to principles and a more or less sterile piety. Though there had been times, there had been times...

Brother John broke in on his superior's thoughtstream. "Reverend Father, could you . . . I mean have you any idea of the nature of the work?"

"None." The Abbott was being somewhat less than frank ; he turned over the papers on his desk, shuffled them into a heap and spread them out once more. "I can tell you this much, it will involve a considerable journey. You'll be going to *Dubris* ; when you arrive you'll put yourself at the disposal of Bishop *Loudain*. You can expect to be gone for some months, probably throughout the sittings of the . . . ah . . . Court of Spiritual Welfare, under Father *Hieronymus*. I can assure you the work will be of some . . . ah . . . importance, you'll be holding a direct commission from *Rome*." He coughed again, looked embarrassed, fiddled with a stylus. "You'll be performing a task of lasting value, Brother," he said stiffly. "A real service to the Church. Better than beer labels, when you've done and said all. Eish . . . ?"

Brother John stayed silent. His mind, accustomed to jogging in its own grave channels, was for once working furiously. There was a lot to be said for the proposition ; as Father *Meredith* had pointed out, it would mean a change of air ; and a journey across England in Spring-time, always to John's mind the most attractive part of the year. And in any case it looked as if his freedom of choice was severely limited ; if Master *Albrecht*, for his own purposes, wanted him out of the way for a time, it behoved him to go. There was professional pride too ; his selection was a mark of honour, he knew that well enough. But . . . nothing decent, nothing good, would ever come out of the doings of the Court of Spiritual Welfare, Father *Meredith* knew that as well as anybody else. Because there

had once been another name for the Court, a name that even in the Church-owned West had fallen into evil repute.

The Inquisition. . . .

John entered the great castle of Dubris by the Old Gate amid a noisy crowd of sightseers; mendicants, soldiers, townsfolk out for the day with picnic hampers and beer, the men swaggering in their Sunday best, the women with children hanging bawling round their skirts. Inside, the little monk paused involuntarily; the red-robed priest who was his guide waited impatiently, fidgeting with the heavy-bound books he carried, stepping from one foot to the other in the jostling of the mob. In front of John reared the second curtain; above it, sullen against the sky, was the huge *donjon*, daunting with its size and closeness. In the outer bailey, curving right as far as the great barbican of the Constable's Gate, an entire fairground had established itself. Steam plumed in the air; organs, Marenghis and Gaviolis, bellowed and clashed their endless tunes; automata conducted jerkily; bare golden nymphs swirled, horses and fabulous beasts glared from the rides. Performing dogs barked and howled, dark-skinned men spat gouts of fire; daneers and jugglers postured, sideshows promised all the erotica of the East. Nearby, on platforms improvised from trestles and beer-crates, cudgel-players split their opponent's heads over boards already brown-daubed with blood, lithe boys in tight breeches of pale blue cloth lashed each other's legs raw with thin switches of hazel. Between the stalls ran children, girls and boys; there were priests, fortune-tellers, sailors with tarred pig-tails sticking out jaunty from their necks, arm in arm with bosomy laughing women; the Papal Blue was much in evidence, and the scarlet robes of Inquisition officers scurrying on various errands. All was noise, colour and confusion. From near the *donjon* smoke rose in a column, staining the sky; over the great plae, beside the cobalt pennant of Pope John, flew the blood-red standard of the Court.

The guide tugged at John's sleeve; he followed, bemused by the uproar. They headed for the inner barbican, the priest shoving and pushing to clear a way through the crowd. Against the bailey wall was an added attraction;

a line of cages, open to the sky, housed the first batch of prisoners. Round them the crowd booted and yelled. John, staring, saw a man lashing at his tormentors with a staff he had somehow wrested from one of them ; his eyes were suffused, flecks of foam covered his beard. Farther on an old woman railed, shaking scrawny fists ; her head had been cut, it seemed by a stone, and blood striped her face and neck brightly. Next her a pretty, long-haired girl defiantly suckled a baby. John turned aside frowning deeply, followed the flapping robes of the priest into the upper bailey. His duties had already been explained to him ; he was to record, for the benefit of Rome, all stages in the procedure of the Court of Father Hieronymus, Witchfinder in General to Pope John. His task would begin with the Questioning of prisoners.

The room set apart for the purpose was located beneath the *donjon* itself, and reached by a spiral stair. John passed through the Great Hall, its crosswall hung now with scarlet in preparation for the work to come. At the head of the recessed stairway a man in Papal blue stood at ease, halberd grounded on the flags in front of him. He came to attention stiffly as John's guide passed. The priest descended the stairs stooping, sandals flopping on stone ; John followed clutching sketchbooks and a satchel crammed with bottles and jars, inks and paints and brushes, pens, erasers, all the paraphernalia of an artist. The little monk was apprehensive already, trying to quiet his jangling nerves.

The room in which he found himself was long and wide, devoid of windows except where to one side a line of grilles set close under the roof admitted livid fans of light. At the far end of the chamber an oil lamp burned ; beneath it clustered a group of figures. John saw dark-dressed, burly men with the *insignium* of the Court, the hand wielding the hammer and the lightning flash, blazoned on their chests ; a chaplain was mumbling over trays of instruments whose purpose he did not recognize. There were spiked rollers, oddly shaped irons, tourniquets of metal beads ; other devices, ranged in rows, he identified with a cold shock. The little frames with their small cranked handles, toothed jaw, ; these were *grésillons*.

Thumbscrews. Such things then really existed. Nearer at hand a species of rough table, fitted at each end with lever-operated wooden rollers, declared its use more plainly. The roof of the place was studded with pulleys, some with their ropes already reeved and dangling; a brazier burned redly, and near it were piled what looked to be huge lead weights.

The priest at Brother John's elbow continued in a low voice the explanation on which he'd felt impelled to embark while crossing the town from their lodgings. "We may taken it then," he said, "that as the crimes of witchcraft and heresy, the raising of devils, receiving of incubi and succubi and like abominations, the trafficking with the Lord of Flies himself, are crimes of the spirit rather than the body, *crimen excepta*, they cannot be judged, and evidence may neither be given nor accepted under normal legal jurisdiction. The admission of spectral evidence and its acceptance as partial proof of guilt subject to confession during Questioning is therefore of vital importance to the functioning of our Court. Under this head too belongs our explanation of the use of torture and its justification; the death of the guilty one disrupts Satan's attack on the Plan of God, as revealed to Mother Church through His Vicar on Earth, our own Pope John; while dying penitent the heretic is saved from greater relapse into the sin of subversion, to find eventually his place in the Divine Kingdom."

Brother John, his face screwed up as if in anticipation of pain, ventured a query. "But are not your prisoners given the opportunity to confess? Were they to confess without the Questioning—"

"There can be no confession," interrupted the other, "without compulsion. As there can be no answering the challenges of spectral evidence, the use of which by definition invalidates the innocence of the accused." He allowed his eyes to travel to one of the pulleys and its dangling rope. "Confession," he said, "must be sincere. It must come from the heart. False confession, made to avoid the pain of Questioning, is useless to Church and God alike. Our aim is salvation; the salvation of the souls of these poor wretches in our charge, if necessary by the

breaking of their bodies. Set against this, all else is straw in the wind."

The muttering of the priest at the far end of the chamber ceased abruptly. John's guide smiled thinly, without humour. "Good," he said. "Your waiting is ended, Brother. They will start soon now."

"What," said Brother John, "were they doing?"

The other turned to him, vaguely surprised. "Doing?" he said. "They were blessing the instruments of the Questioning, of course. . . ."

"But," said Brother John, rubbing his pate as was his custom when bewildered, "what I don't seem to understand is the question of impregnation by the incubus. If as you say the incubus, the demon in its masculine form, is able physically to fertilize its victim, then the concept of diabolie delusion is invalidated. Creation by a minion of Satan is surely——"

The priest turned on him quickly, eyes glittering. "I would advise you," he said, "to understand very clearly. You are on dangerous ground here, more dangerous than you realize. The demon, being a sexless entity, is unable to create; as its Master is impotent in the face of God. But by receiving as succubus the seed of man, and transporting it invisibly through the air, the thing can be arranged; and is arranged, as you will see. I am not a heretic, Brother."

"I see," said John, white to the lips. "You must forgive me, Brother Sebastian; we Adhelimans are technicians and mechanics, mere journeymen not noted in our lower orders at least for learning of such profundity. . . ."

There was a distant flourish of trumpets, muffled by the vastness of the walls.

Brother John left Dubris by a rutted track that wound through the scrubland to the north of the town. He sat his horse untidily, slumped forward in the saddle with his eyes on the ground. The dusty red gown, soiled now and frayed at the hem, flapped round his calves; he held the reins slackly so the animal meandered from side to side of the road, picking its own way. When it stopped, which

was often, John made no attempt to urge it forward. He sat staring fixedly ; once he lifted his head to gaze blankly at the horizon. His face had lost its colouring, acquiring instead a greyish sheen like the face of a corpse ; fits of shivering shook him, as though he was suffering from a fever. He had lost a great deal of weight ; his girdle, once tightly drawn, now hung loosely round his stomach. His satchel of equipment still swung from the pommel of the saddle but the sketchbooks were gone, were already if Brother Sebastian was to be believed on their way by special courier to Rome. Before parting, the Inquisitor had complimented John on his application and the fineness of his work, and attempted to cheer him by pointing out the immense setback the hearings had been to the cause of the Devil in Kent ; but getting no answer had left him, not without a backward glance or two and a searching of the spirit. For he had become convinced during the weeks of their association that heresy burned somewhere in the heart of Brother John himself. There were times when he had almost felt tempted to bring the matter to the attention of Father Hieronymus, but who knew what repercussions might have resulted? The Adhelmiens, in spite of what John himself had described as a certain lack of scholarship, were a valued and respected Order in the land, and the limner had after all held a commission from Rome. Brother Sebastian was a zealot, tireless in the prosecution of his Faith ; but there are times when even the devout find it advisable to turn a blind eye. . . .

A farm cart passed rumbling, trailing a cloud of whitish dust. John's horse curveted ; the priest chided gently, vacant-faced. Through the deep channels of his brain noises still echoed. A susurration, rising and falling like a shrill and hellish sea ; the shrieks of the damned, and the dying, and the dead. And the sizzling of braziers, thud of whips splitting flesh ; creaking of leather and wood, squeak and groan of sinews as machines tested to destruction the handiwork of God. John had seen it all ; the whitehot pincers round the breasts, branding irons pushed smoking into mouths, calf-length boots topped up with boiling lead, the heated chairs, the spiked seats on which they bounced their victims then stacked the lead slabs on

their thighs. . . . The *Territo*, the *Questions Preparatoire*, *Ordinaire*, *Extraordinaire*; squassation and the *strappado*, the rack and the choking-pear; the Questioners stripped and sweating while the great mad Judge upstairs extracted from the foamings of epileptics the stuff of conviction after conviction. . . . Pencil and brush recorded faithfully, flying at the paper with returning skill while Brother Sebastian stood and frowned, pulling at his lip and shaking his head. It seemed John's hands worked of their own, tearing the pages aside, grabbing for inks and washes while the drawings grew in depth and vividness. The brilliant sidelighting; film of sweat on bodies that distended and heaved in ecstasies of pain; arms disjointed by the weights and pulleys, stomachs exploded by the rack, bright tree shapes of new blood running to the floor. It seemed the limner tried to force the stench, the squalor, even at last the noise down onto paper; Brother Sebastian, impressed in spite of himself, had finally dragged John away by force, but he couldn't stop him working. He drew a wizard in the outer bailey, pulled apart by four Suffolk Punches; the doomed men and women sitting on their tar kegs waiting for the torch; the stark things that were left when the flames had died away. "*Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live*," Sebastian had said at his parting. "*Remember that, Brother. Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live*. . . ." John's lips moved, repeating the words in silence.

Night overtook him a bare half dozen miles from Dubris. He dismounted in the dark, awkwardly, tethered the horse while he fetched water from a stream. In the stream he dropped the satchel of brushes and paints. He stood a long time staring, though in the blackness he couldn't see it float away.

At his rate of travel it took many weeks to reach his home. Sometimes he took wrong turnings; sometimes people fed him, and then he blessed them and cried. Once a gang of footpads jumped him but the white mouth and staring eyes had them backing off in fear of one bewitched, or taken by the Plague. He finally entered Dorset miles off course at Blandford Forum. For a time he followed the westward meanderings of the Frome; beyond Durnovaria he turned north for Sherborne. Somebody recognized

the crimson habit, put him on the road, filled his scrip with bread he never ate. In mid-July he reached his House ; at the gates he gave the horse away to a ragged child. His Abbott, appalled, had him confined in the sickbay and took immediate steps to recover the animal, but it had vanished. John lay in a room bright with summer flowers, with fuchsias and begonias and roses from the monastery grounds, watching the sun patches glide on the walls and the fleecy piling of clouds in the blue sky. He only spoke once, and then to Brother Joseph ; leaning upright, eyes frightened and wild, gripping the boy's wrist. "I *enjoyed* it, Brother," he whispered. "God and the Saints preserve me, I *enjoyed my work.* . . ." Joseph tried to calm him, but to no avail.

A month passed before he rose and dressed himself. He had taken little food ; he was thin now to the point of gauntness and his eyes were feverishly bright. He put himself to work on the litho presses ; Master Albrecht chided, but he was ignored. John toiled all day, through the lunchtime break, through supper and the vesper bell. Night and the moon found him still working, inking the stone he could no longer see, swabbing, dropping the tympan, hauling the spokes of the wheel, lowering the bed, inking, dropping the tympan. . . . Brother Joseph stayed with him a time, watching huddled in the shadows ; then he too left, appalled by something he couldn't understand.

It was early morning before John faltered in his penance. He stood slightly bowed, a dark shape outlined by a sheen of moonlight, listening, screwing his face as if trying to catch the echoes from some noise outside the range of human ears. Whimperings came from him ; he staggered like a drunken man to the middle of the floor, dropped prone with arms outstretched. Over him a rooflight rattled in a sudden wind ; he sat up, glared round straining for the sound, if it was a sound, he'd heard. It was then he suffered the first of the visions or hallucinations that were to haunt him the rest of his days. Its onset was a quick thudding, like a drum rushing at night over a great tract of land. The room darkened, then glowed. John babbled, clawed at his face and tried to pray.

There had been a country girl at Dubris, a pretty wench whose crime, monstrous and unnatural, had been the receiving of an ineubus. Her they released, finally ; but before they let her go they clipped the fingers from one small paw, and gave them her in a cloth. Brother John saw her again, clear in the moonlight. She passed across the room, mewing and dissatisfied ; and after her traipsed the host of horrors, the cut legs and arms, the severed heads, the bodies broken on the wheel, pierced and burned by the hot iron chairs. A bawling came from them and a howling, a lowing like the noise of the ghosts of cows, a dead-bird chittering, a crying, a wanting . . . John's face suffused ; round him lights shone, the wheels of the presses seemed to spin like dark spoked suns. He was assaulted by thunders and strange rattlings ; his eyes rolled upward, disclosing the whites ; he hammered at the floor with his fists, cried out and lay still.

In the morning the Brothers, not finding him in his cell, searched the workshops. Then the whole monastery, then its grounds. But it was useless ; Brother John had gone.

His Eminence the Cardinal Archbishop of Londinium sighed heavily, rubbed his chin, yawned, and took a turn up and down the office from his desk to the windows that looked down on the grounds of the Episcopal Palace. He stood at the windows awhile, hands clasped behind him, chin sunk on his chest. The gardens were alive with colour now, with lilies and delphiniums and the newest McCredy roses ; His Eminence was a *gourmet* in all things temporal. His eyes saw the display vaguely, and the fishponds beyond where aged carp rose to the tinkling of a handbell. Beyond the ponds again, beyond the herb gardens with their twisting paved walks, was the outer wall. Over it, gloomily, rose the slab side and lines of windows of the prison-like College of Signallers. Noises from Londinium's maze of streets reached the study faintly ; cries of hawkers, rumble and crash of waggon wheels, from somewhere the pealing of bells. The mind of His Eminence noted the sounds automatically ; he pursed his lips, following his own tortuous and none too pleasant train of thought.

He returned slowly to his desk. On it, an open file

disgorged a small flood of papers. He picked one up, frowning. Under the formal heading and more formal speech the rage of a pious and honest man was very plain.

'My Lord,

May I crave the indulgence of Your Eminence to bring to your notice a matter of the most heinous and appalling nature; the torture, the agony, the foul indignities visited, in the name of the Christos, on the people of this my diocese. On the poor and the infirm, the aged and the simple of mind . . . on children and old men in their dotage, on mothers big with child . . . on parents by their daughters and sons, on husbands by their wives; I can My Lord hold peace no longer in the face of iniquity, of horror—'

His Eminence detected an error in the rush of Latin; his red fountain pen, irritably and automatically, made an erasure.

'—horror such as has been perpetrated on us in this loyal, this ancient and this blameless town. On the innocent and the foolish, on the helpless subjects of a Church and of a God professing love, and charity, and enlightenment. . . . This madman, this desecrator of decency, and his so-called Spiritual Court. . . .'

The Cardinal flicked the pages to the signature and shook his head. Bishop Loudain of Dubris was a bold man but a foolish one; the letter alone, placed in the proper hands, would have secured for His Grace an interlude with those very *grésillons* of which he so ardently complained. The thing reeked of heresy. . . . The Cardinal lifted the document carefully with his fingertips and redeposited it in its file. He picked up another, terser and to the point, from the commander of the garrison stationed at Duraovaria.

' . . . the renegade known to the people as Brother John continues to evade our forces. Riots stemming directly from the teaching of him and of his followers have lately broken out in Sherborne, Sturminster Newton, Shaftesbury, Blandford and Durnovaria itself. The people, attributing his escapes from our troops to miraculous intervention, become daily more difficult to control. I most earnestly request the release of a further

troop of horse with a minimum of four hundred infantry and appropriate arms and stores, for the purpose of searching the region from Beaminster to Yeovil where it is currently believed the insurgents are quartered. Their strength is now estimated at between fifty and a hundred; they are well armed, and have an intimate knowledge of the local terrain. Attempts to run them down employing normal methods of approach have repeatedly proved useless. . . .

His Eminence dropped the letter impatiently. That and a dozen more like it had prompted his own formal document of excommunication. Sentence had been passed on Brother John six months ago; but it would seem the disavowal of the Church and the consequent damnation of his soul had had little effect. His followers had in fact been fired to greater excesses; a detachment of two dozen horse pulled down and massacred in broad daylight, their arms and equipment stolen; a Captain of the Roman Dragoons set on and beaten, sent cantering into Durnovaria with insulting messages pinned to his tunic; the Pope burned in effigy at Woodhenge and Badbury Rings. The Cardinal was only too uncomfortably aware of the dangers inherent in martyrdom; he would have preferred to ignore John altogether, let the whole wretched business die a natural death, but his hand was being forced.

He turned to the brief account of the rebel's life and accomplishments, brought to Londinium at his request by an unusually subdued Adhelmanian whose ears His Eminence would very much have liked to send back to Father Meredith on a plate for letting his confounded people get so far out of hand in the first place. The Adhelmanians, admittedly through no fault of their own, were rapidly becoming the *leitmotif* of a new and disquieting popular movement. The resurging power of Anglicanism fed on such relics of ancient worship; for had not Saint Adhhelm himself converted vast stretches of the country to the Faith centuries before the clergy flocking in at the heels of the conquering Normans restored Britain to the rule of Rome? The Anglican Communion had been an historic fact, however strenuously the Church tried to deny it, and the case for it could still be made out. Many years had

elapsed too between Henry's abolition of Papal rule and the excommunication of Elizabeth, years in which the English Church had presumably co-existed in a state of Grace. Greasy apologetics maybe, but dangerous ideas to let loose among a population lacking in general the fine points of theological instruction. The old cry of the Church, to submit and to adore, was no longer enough ; the people were being tempted once more to set up their own spiritual hierarchy, and John or some such figure was tailor-made to head it.

The renegade then had attended the last sittings of the Court of Spiritual Welfare ; that, thought His Eminence as he re-read facts already learned by heart, was clearly the beginning of the whole ridiculous affair. He shook his head. How explain? How quiet the rage of a man like Loudain with figures and facts, political argument? His Eminence shrugged tiredly. In the history of the world, there had been no power like the power of the second Rome. To hold half a planet in the cup of your hands ; to juggle, to balance one against the next forces nearly beyond the mind of man to grasp. . . . The rage of nations was like the anger of the sea, not to be contained with straws. Anglicanism had torn the country once, the history of it was all there in the great books that lined the study walls. Then, England had glowed from her Cornish toe to her Pennine spine with the light of the *auto-da-fé*. Against that set a little pain, a little blood, soon gone and nearly as soon forgotten ; that, and the mighty wisdom of the Church. . . .

Once too often, mused the Cardinal ; the goad, the threat of Hellfire, applied instead of the lure of the Kingdom of Love. . . . Father Hieronymus, mad as he undoubtedly was, had been useful in the past ; but this time his gory circus had triggered an uproar that could easily involve all England. Uncharitable and surprising thoughts whirled through the head of the Archbishop of Londinium. He rose again to stand brooding, looking down on the gardens that were his chief delight. He seemed to see the roses smashed by irreverent feet, the lilies trodden into a bloody soil ; his house destroyed and burning, its winecellars desecrated, its pantries and

kitchens, its studies and libraries in flames. Blast Father Hieronymus, and blast the Adhelmiens, and above all blast Brother John. . . . His Eminence by nature of his position was economist and politician as much as churchman; in his more cynical moods he seemed to see the whole vast fabric of the Church stretched like a glittering blanket, a counterpane of cloth of gold, across the body of a giant. At times like this the giant moved and grumbled, turned in a restless sleep. Soon, he would wake. . . .

He resolutely put the idea aside, returned to his bureau, slid out from a drawer the formal document he had spent most of yesterday morning dictating to his clerk.

'Whereas the heretic known as Brother John, ex of the Order of the Adhelmiens, whose body we have pronounced excommunicate and whose soul we cast down to the Fire that is eternal, continues to flout the Will of God and of His true Church in this land, it is our duty to convey this solemn Notice and Warning:

Any person harbouring the heretic or any of his band; any person supplying it with food, drink, arms, shot and powder or any like victuals; ,

Any person found in possession of letters, proclamations or other matter originated by Brother John or any of his band, or contriving the distribution of such pamphlets to further the cause of Satan against the glory of God;

Any person concealing information as to the whereabouts of the said heretic or any of his band; any person attending any meeting, orgy or like exhibition held by them who shall not declare the same, with all he may know touching the same, to a priest, a garrison commander or a serjeant of law within one day of the offence;

Shall be declared excommunicate, and heinous in the sight of God; and on conviction before any Justice of the Peace or any Clerical Court, shall be hung and drawn, and his quarters salted and tarred, and displayed in such manner as be deemed fitting for the warning and education of other heretics or traitors to God and the cause of His Church.

Further it is our duty to proclaim the following rewards:

For information leading to the capture, alive or dead, of Brother John or any of his band, twenty five pounds in gold.

For the capture, alive or dead, of any of the band of Brother John, fifty pounds in gold.

For the capture, alive or dead, of Brother John himself, two hundred pounds in gold; to be paid at our Episcopal Palace of Lambeth on receipt of the body of the heretic, or of good and sufficient evidence of its destruction.

Given under our hand this twenty first day of June, Year of Our Lord one thousand, nine hundred and eighty five.'

The Cardinal nodded his head finally with gloomy approval. The Church stood in grave need of a well-disciplined Saint or two; John was a first-rate man going to waste. His Eminence shrugged, and called for a secretary to bring his private seal.

At the head of the coombe the infantry had deployed in a half circle. Other soldiers, the blue of their uniforms showing clearly, lined the rocks of the gully, beneath the brow of which were the mouths of several caves. Sporadic bursts of smoke blew from them as the defenders, outnumbered and surrounded, fought on pointlessly. Two hundred yards from the stronghold a demiculverin was being trained. The piece had been protected by a hastily built demilune of rocks; behind the breastwork sweating men applied levers to the wheels of the carriage. Balks of timber thrust beneath their rims were raising the gun by degrees but the elevation was impossibly high; on its first discharge its captain confidently expected the trail to smash, driven back by the recoil into the ground on which it rested. Near the gun a shakoed major, sword unsheathed, sat a fretting horse and tongue-lashed the men into greater efforts. Frontal attacks had already proved costly; farther up the coombe scraps of blue cloth showed where the

heretics had taken their toll of the infantry. The major, not a man to risk troops uselessly, swore and waved the sword at the stronghold. A puff of smoke answered him, the ball splitting a rock twenty feet to his left and singing off into distance. A ragged volley from the troops sheltering in the gully drove the defenders back ; the major thought he heard, mixed with the echoes of the shots, the noise of a scream.

The first round from the greatgun sent stone chips whining from the ledge a yard below the cavemouths ; the second started a small landslip above and to the right. The third discharge knocked the piece from its crudely-built platform, smashing the legs of a gunner. The captain swore, wishing for a pot-mortar, but there was no mortar to be had. The barrel was remounted and elevated more securely ; the Papists settled down to batter the rebel position to fragments.

The small figure in the dark crimson robe was twenty yards from the fissures, scuttling over the rocks of a goat path, before the first piece was brought to bear. Puffs of dust rose from the rockface around and above the fugitive ; the major, yelling, rode across the line of sight of his men, forcing them to aim. The renegade, brought down within twenty feet of the top of the cliff, slithered a great distance before coming to rest ; but he still had life enough in him to aim a pistol, blowing off the kneecap of a man on the major's right as the infantry charged home. The major grunted, stopped to pull aside the cowl of the Adhelmian. Tumbling fair hair was disclosed ; the boy grinned up at him in pain, blood showing round his teeth.

At the major's side his aide said disgustedly "*Discipulus. . . .*"

"Catamite more likely," growled the other. He seized the hair and shook. "Well, you nasty little fellow," he said. "Where's your ass-chafing master?"

No answer. Another shaking ; Brother Joseph half raised himself, spat redness at the face above him. The aide shook his head. "They won't talk, sir. None of the Bulgarians"

"Of that," said the major crushingly, "I was in fact aware. Stretcher-bearers here, sergeant. . . ."

The soldier doubled back down the hill. The boy panted, lifted himself again, proffered before collapsing a stained fist. The major knelt, delicately avoiding the seeping blood, to prise the fingers apart. He straightened up turning over in his palm the tiny medallion with the crossing crab-lines. "This," he said softly, "is all we needed. . . ." He thrust the fairy mark into his uniform pocket, before his aide could see.

The cave, searched, yielded a mass of trophies. Six bodies, three of them intact, enough of the rest remaining to satisfy even a suspicious Papal clerk. The price had risen now to a hundred and fifty pounds a rebel; that made nine hundred quids worth, over a thousand altogether. A nice little haul for the battalion. In addition there were supplies of food and arms, books and heretical documents, stacks of leaflets waiting distribution. These the major ordered burned. At the back of the chamber, fairly well knocked about by the cannonade, lay the remains of an ancient Albion press and scattered cases of type. The major sent for sledgehammers, and stirred the mess of leaflets with a booted toe. "Well at least," he remarked philosophically to his aide, "there'll be less of this bump floating about in the future. . . ."

But the manoeuvre had failed in its main objective. Once again, Brother John had escaped.

Over the weeks the rumours grew. John was here, he was there; troops rode hurriedly by night, villages were ransacked, rewards were claimed a score of times but never paid. A tale arose that John, in league with the People of the Heath, could be transported by magically swift means away from danger. '*Transvestism*', snarled Rome, and doubled the head money. Informers flourished; cottages were burned, whole towns fined. Bodies swayed at crossroads, gruesome in their chains, foci for black towers of birds. The giant grumbled and tossed, restlessly.

Wells Cathedral was desecrated; though the desecration didn't in fact amount to very much. There was no indication that the High Altar had been approached with aught save deep respect but placed on it, in full and hideous view,

was a placard carrying certain writing. The document was seized of course and instantly burned but the rumour went out that the words had been a text from Scripture, heretically translated into Middle and Modern English. '*My house shall be called a house of God, but ye have made it a den of robbers*' . . . The same thing happened at Aquae Sulis ('*Give all that ye have to the poor*') and at the residence of the Bishop of Dorset himself. ('*It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven*'). But such foibles were the work of disciples, declared or secret; John himself travelled continuously, teaching and praying. Sometimes the visions tormented him so that he rolled and frothed, beating his fists bloody on the ground, tearing at clothes and skin till his followers huddled back in frowning fear. Maybe the phantoms, the drumming and screaming, the hacked hands and limbs, followed him still across the gorse deserts of the West; maybe the Old Ones did meet him and comfort, sit and talk their ancient faith by the stones of temples old before the Romans came, under the wheeling clouds and the spinning fantasies of moon and sun. John gave away his shoes and cloak, his staff; some whispered it was struck into the ground and flowered, like the staff of the blessed Joseph at Glastonbury.

If the rumour reached John's ears he gave no sign. He moved like a ghost, lips mumbling, eyes unseeing, the rain gusting round him and the wind; and somehow the people hid him and kept him fed while the soldiers of the Blue quartered Dorset wearily from Sherborne to Corvesgeat, from Sarum Rings to the Valley of the Giant at Cerne. John's nuisance value rose steadily; from five hundred pounds to a thousand, from a thousand to fifteen hundred, and from that to an incredible two thousand pounds, chargeable against the accounts of the Episcopal Palace of Londinium. But of the man himself there was no sign. The rumours flew again. Some claimed he was planning a revolt against Rome, that he was lying low till he had raised a sufficient army; others said he was sick, or injured, or had fled the country; and finally, the whisper went out that he was dead. His followers, and by this time

they numbered thousands, waited and mourned. But John wasn't dead ; he had moved back into the hills, following the lepers now, tracking them by their lonely, angry bells.

The clustered houses of the village lay or huddled on an exposed sweep of heathland. The cottages were of grey stone, storm-shuttered and desolate. The few trees that grew were stunted and low, carved by the wind into strange smooth shapes ; their branches leaned toward the roofs as if for protection. From the place a rutted road ran, winding out across the wasteland to lose itself in distance.

Across the heath, vaguely visible in the strange light, ran a high curve of hills. Over them on a brighter day a white glower would have told of the closeness of the sea ; now the dead, dust-coloured sky was empty and flat. Out of it skirled a March wind, wet and hugely blustering. It plucked at the cloak of the girl who sat patient by the roadside a hundred yards beyond the last of the cottages. With one hand she held the rough cloth tight against her throat ; her hair, escaping from the hood, flaked long and dark round her face. She watched steadily, staring out across the grey-brown of the heath toward the distant silhouettes of the hills.

An hour she waited, two ; the wind seethed in the bracken, once a squall of rain lashed across the road. The hills were fading with the coming dusk when she rose and stood staring under her hand, straining her eyes at the grey gnat-blur on the very fringe of vision. For minutes she stood motionless, seeming not to breathe, while the blur advanced steadily, turned to a dark pin-head, a tiny tadpole shape, resolved itself finally into the figure of a mounted man. The girl moaned then, an odd noise, a half-whimper deep in her throat ; dropped to her knees, glared terrified at the houses and out along the road. The rider advanced, seeming to her frightened stare to move without progression, jogging like a puppet under the vastness of the sky. Her fingers scrabbled on the road in front of her, smoothed the skirt across her thighs, touched her side as if to ease the thudding of her heart.

The man sat the donkey slackly, letting the beast pick its way. On either side of its belly his feet hung, swaying

rhythmically, scraping the tops of the grasses. The feet were bare, brown-striped with blood from old cuts ; the gown he wore was torn and stained by long use, its original maroon faded to a reddish grey. His face was thin, sag-lines in the flesh marking former fullness, and the eyes above the tangled beard were bright and mad as those of a bird. From time to time he mumbled, bursting into snatches of song, throwing his head back to laugh at the sullen sky, waving a hand in vague gestures of blessing at the desolation round him.

The donkey reached the road finally and stopped as if uncertain of its way. Its rider waited, chanting and muttering ; and the brilliant restless eyes slowly became aware of the girl. She still knelt in the road, face downcast ; she lifted her head to see the stranger regarding her, hand still half raised. She ran to him then, fell to clutch the rough hem of his robe. She began to cry ; the tears spilled out unchecked, coursing pathways down her grubby face.

The rider stared at her, vaguely puzzled ; then he reached down and attempted to lift her. She quivered at the touch, and clung tighter. "You . . . come . . ." she muttered, as if to the donkey. "Come . . ."

"The blessings of an outcast be on you," mumbled the stranger, tongue seeming to stumble unused over the words. He frowned, as if striving to recollect ; then, "How beautiful on the mountains," he said inconsequently, "are the feet of him who brings good tidings. . . ." He rubbed his face, tangled his fingers in his hair. "There was a man," he said slowly, "who talked of cures. . . . Who needs me, sister? Who called on Brother John?"

"I . . . did. . . ." Her voice was muffled ; she was scrabbling at the cloth of his gown hem, kissing and rubbing her face against his foot. John's wandering attention was riveted ; he tried to raise her again, awkwardly. "For what purpose, sister?" he asked gently. "I can but pray ; prayer is free to all . . ."

"To cure. . . ." She swallowed and snivelled, not wanting to say the words. Then they burst from her. "To cure . . . by the laying-on of hands. . . ."

"Up. . . !"

She felt herself yanked to her feet, held where she had to stare at blazing eyes, their pupils contracted to pinpoints of darkness. "There is no cure," hissed John between his teeth, "but the mercy of God. His mercy is infinite. His compassion enfolds us all. I am but His unworthy instrument; there is no power, save the power of prayer. All else is heresy, an evil for which men die. . . ." He flung her back from him; then the mood passed. He wiped his forehead, slid clumsily from the donkey. "You shall ride, my sister," he said. "For it is not fitting I should emulate Him who entered once upon His Kingdom, riding such a beast as this. . . ." The words lost themselves in mumbling, blown ragged by the wind. "I will see your husband," said Brother John.

The cottage was low and cramped, sour-smelling; somewhere a baby bawled, a dog scratched for fleas on the hearth. John ducked through the doorway, guided by the timorous grip of the girl's hand on his wrist; she closed the door behind him, fastening it by its peg and thong. "We keeps it dark," she whispered, "'cause he reckoned that might halp. . . ."

John moved forward carefully. Beside the fire a man sat rigidly, hands resting on his knees. He wore the coarse dress, the leather-reinforced jerkin and trews, of a quarryman. Beside him on a rough table stood a partially cleared plate of food and a tankard of beer; a pipe lay untouched in the hearth. His hair was overlong, hanging in thick sweeps beside his ears; his brows were level and thickly black but the eyes were invisible. Round them as a blindfold he wore a coloured kerchief, knotted behind his head.

"He's come," said the girl timidly. "Brother John, as'll cure thee. . . ." She rested a hand on the man's shoulder. He made no answer; instead he reached up gently, took her arm and pushed her away. She turned back to Brother John, gulping. "Bin comin' on this six months an' more," she said helplessly. "First he reckoned . . . 'twas like cobwebs, laid across his face. He couldn't see no more, only in the sun. Kept on sayin', 'twere dark. All the time, 'twere dark. . . ."

"Sister," said John quietly. "Have you a lantern? A torch?"

She nodded dumbly, eyes on his face.

"Then fetch it here to me."

She brought the light, lit it with a spill from the fire. John placed the lamp where its open side glowed on the face of the blind man. "Let me see. . . ."

The eyes, uncovered, were dark and fierce, in keeping with the proud, stern face. Brother John raised the lantern, angling it at the pupils, turning the head of the peasant with his fingers under the black-shadowed jaw. He stared a long time, seeing behind the corneas the milky paleness reflect back the light; then he lowered the lamp to the hearth. A long silence; then, "I pity you sister," he said, white-lipped. "There is nothing I can do but pray. . . ."

The girl stared at him in blank incomprehension; then her hands went to her mouth, and she started again to cry.

John lay that night in an outbuilding, mumbling and tossing on a pile of hay; it was only toward dawn that the trumpets and drums stopped beating in his brain and he slept.

The quarryman rose before first light and dressed silently, not hurrying. Beside him his wife lay still, breathing steady; he touched her arm, and she moaned in her sleep. He left her and walked through the cottage, horny fingers gentle now touching furniture and the familiar backs of chairs. He unfastened the door, felt the morning air move fresh and raw on his face. Once outside he needed no more guides. The lives of the people round about were governed by the working of stone; the tiny quarries scattered through the hills were handed down from father to son through generations. Over the years his feet and the feet of his forebears had worn a track from the cottage out across the heath. He followed it, face turned up to catch the grey smearing that was all his eyes could show him of the dawn. Habit had made him take the lantern; it bumped his knee hollowly as he walked. He reached the quarry, lifted aside the pole that symbolically closed its entrance. He stood a long time

inside, leaning his palms against the coolness of the stone ; then he found his tools, fondled them to feel the worn smoothness his hands had given them. He started to work.

John, roused by the distant tap of hammer against stone, shook himself free of a feverish dream and turned his head to locate the sound. He rose quietly, slipped his feet into the sandals laid ready for him and padded out into the cold morning, breath rising in puffs of steam as he walked.

The girl was already at the quarry ; she crouched on the ground outside, staring dumbly. From within came the rhythmic clinking as the blind man worked at the stone face, measuring, feeling, cutting by touch. A heap of rough-dressed blocks already stood by the entrance ; as John watched the quarryman emerged hefting another slab, walked steadily back to his task.

The girl's eyes were on John's face, wonderingly. He shook his head. "I can pray," he muttered. "I can but pray. . . ."

The morning passed, wore on into afternoon, and the noise of the hammer didn't stop. Once the girl fetched food but John wouldn't let her near her husband ; the swinging mallet would have brained her. When the sky began to darken the pile of stone stood six feet high, blocking his view ; he moved his position from where his knees had dented the rough ground, to where he could once more see. The short day, halfway between winter and spring, ended ; but the man inside needed no light. The hammer rang steadily ; and John at last divined his purpose. He prayed again feverishly, prostrating himself on the ground. Hours later he slept despite the bitterness of the wind. He woke nearly too stiff to move. In front of him the hammer chinked in blackness. The girl returned with the dawn, carrying the baby beneath her cloak ; someone brought food that she refused. John was racked by cramps ; his hands and feet blued with the cold. All through the day the wind rose, roaring at the heath.

They were strange, black-spirited folk, these Dorset peasants. The men of the village came one by one and squatted and stared ; but none of them tried to take the worker from his task. It would have been useless ; he would

have returned, as surely as the wind returns again and again to the heaths and half-seen hills. The hammer rang from dawn to nightfall ; rain gusted on the wind, pelting John's back, soaking his body through the robe. He ignored it, as he ignored the frozen aches in belly and thighs, the flashings and fainting thunders of his brain. The old gods would have understood, he thought ; they who roared and sweated through the day, hacking each other's guts in endless war to fall and die and be raised each dusk again, carouse the night away in their palace of Valhalla. But the Christian God, what of Him? Would He accept blood sacrifice, as He accepted the torn souls of His witches? Of course, mumbled John's tired brain, because He is the same. His drink is blood, His food is flesh, His sacraments work and misery and endless hopeless pain. . . .

By the second dawn the piles of stone stretched yards across the heath ; and the hammer was still falling, faltering now and erratic, cutting more. Stone for the palaces of the rich, cathedrals for the glory of Rome. . . . The huge wind roared among the hills, flapped the cloak of the girl as she sat patient as a cow, hands crossed in her lap, eyes brimming with half-comprehended pain. John crouched defeated, unable now to stand, fingers frozen in their clasping, while the villagers watched dour from across the heath.

And it was ended, the sacrifice made and taken ; the worker of stone lay face down, the stuff of a score of legends. A vein pumped in his brown leather neck, blood glowed brightly on muzzle and throat ; his body coughed and moved, settling, and John, shuffling forward on useless knees and hands, knew before he reached him he was dead.

He raised himself, with an agonized creaking of bones. At his feet the girl stared greyly, stone herself among the grey stone hills ; his shadow reached before him, thin and long, wriggling on the tussocky grass of the heath.

Brother John turned slowly, the rushing and the drumming once more in his brain, raised a white face as above him a weird sun glowed. Brighter it grew and brighter again, a cosmic ghost, a swollen impossibility poised in the blustering sky. John cried out hoarsely, raised his arms ;

and round the orb a circle formed, pearly and blazing. Then another and another, filling the sky, engulfing, burning cold as ice till with a silent thunder their diameters joined, became a cross of silver flame, lambent and vast. At the node points other suns shone and others and more and more, heaven-consuming ; and John saw quite clearly now the fiery swarms of angels descend and rise. A noise came from them, a great sweet sound of rejoicing that seemed to enter his tired brain like a sword. He screamed again, inarticulate, staggering forward, shambling and running while behind him his great shadow flapped and capered. Then the people ran ; out into the heath, back along the village street, spreading out from round him as from a focus, tatting and pecking at the shuttered houses while the word spread faster than feet could move, quicker soon than the quickest horse ; that round Brother John the heavens opened, transfiguring with glory. The tale grew, feeding on itself, till God in His own person looked down clear-eyed from the azure arch of the sky.

The soldiers heard, at Golden Cap and Wey Mouth and Wool inland on the heath ; the clacking telegraphs brought news of a countryside on the stir. Messages flew for reinforcements, shot and powder, cavalry, greatguns. Durnovaria answered and Bourne Mouth and Poole ; but the hurricane was in the towers, felling them like saplings. By midday the lines were silent, Golden Cap itself a jumble of broken spars. The garrison commander there mustered a platoon of infantry and two of horse and force-marched across country, hoping against hope to nip rebellion in the bud. One man and one only could hold the rabble, make it fight ; Brother John. This time, one way or another, Brother John had to go.

The glory faded ; but still the people came, flocking across the heath, fighting their carts and waggons over the hills, bogging in the squelching lanes as they strove to reach him. Some came to him with money and clothing, food, offers of shelter, fast horses. They begged him to run, warned of the soldiers racing to cut him off ; but the noise still roaring in his ears deafened him and the sundogs, glowing in his brain, blinded the last of his reason. The host, the ragged army, grew behind him as

he reeled across the heath, face to the great wind from the south. Some brought arms; pitchforks and scythes and knives on poles, muskets hauled from the thatch of twenty score of cottages. Chanting, they reached the sea; following still, on horseback and on foot, down the steep roads of Kimmeridge, out to the black bite of a bay and the savageness of the water. There they collided at last with the contingent from Golden Cap. The soldiers of the Blue attacked; but there were too many. A charge, a scattering, a man pulled down, trampled and cut; screams tossed away by the wind, a red thing left shaking on the grass, a horse running riderless stabbed bloody by the pikes. . . . The Papists withdrew, following the column just inside long musketshot, sniping to try to turn its head.

Brother John ignored the skirmishing; or perhaps he never saw. Riding now, driven forward by the voices and the noises in his brain, he reached the cliff edge. Below was a waste of water, wild and white, tumbling to the horizon and beyond. Here were no rollers; the hurricane, into which a man might lean, flung the tops off the waves. From a score of runoffs the cliffs spouted water into the bay; but the streams were caught by the wind and held, flung bodily back over the edge of the land, wavering upward arcs that fed a ruffled lake of flood. At the cliffs, John reined; the horse turned bucking, mane streaming in the wind. He raised his arms, calling the people in till they crowded close to hear; blackfaced men in sweaters and caps and boots, stolid women clutching scarves to their throats; darkhaired Dorset girls, legs sturdy in their bright blue jeans. Way off on the left the cavalry bunched and jostled, carbines to their shoulders; the smoke of the discharges was whipped away in instantaneous flashes of white. A ball curved singing above John's head; another smashed the foot of a girl on the edge of the crowd. The mob turned outward, dangerously. The riders pulled back. A gun was coming, dragged by muleteams from the barracks at Lulworth, but until it arrived their captain knew he was helpless; to throw this handful of men into that rabble would be to consign them to death. Miles away, out on the heath, the teams strained at the limber of the culverin; spare ammunition carts jolted behind,

heading a column of infantry. But there were no more cavalry, none to be had; there was no time. . . .

Over Brother John the seagulls wheeled. He raised his arms again and again, seeming to call the birds in till the great creatures hung motionless, wings outspread a scant six feet above him. The crowd fell silent; and he started to speak.

"People of Dorset . . . fishermen and farmers and you, marblers and roughmasons, who grub the old stone up out of the hills . . . and you, Fairies, the People of the Heath, you were-things riding the wind, hear my words and remember. Mark them all your lives, mark them for all time; so in the years to come, no hearth shall ever be without the tale. . . ." The syllables rang shrieking and thin, pulverised by the wind; and even the injured girl stopped moaning and lay propped against the knees of her friends, straining to hear. John told them of themselves; of their faith and their work, their lonely carving of existence out of stone and rock and bareness; of the great Church that held the land by the throat, choking their breath in the grip of her brocade fist. In his brain visions still burned and hummed; he told them of the mighty Change that would come, sweeping away blackness and misery and pain, leading them at last to the Golden Age. He saw clearly, rising about him on the hills, the buildings of that new time, the factories and hospitals, power stations and laboratories. He saw the machines flying above the land, skimming like bubbles the surface of the sea. He saw wonders; lightning chained, the wild waves of the very air made to talk and sing. All this would come to pass, all this and more. The age of tolerance, of reason, of humanity, of the dignity of the human soul. "But," he shouted, and his voice was cracking now, lost in the great sound of the wind, "but for a time, I must leave you . . . following the course shown me by God, who in His wisdom saw fit to make me . . . the least worthy of His people . . . His instrument, and subject to His will. For He gave me a sign, and the sign burned in heaven, and I must follow and obey. . . ."

The crowd jostled; a roaring came from it, faint then louder, rising at last over the sound of the wind. A

hundred voices shouted "Where . . . where . . ." and John turned, gown sleeve flogging at his arm, and pointed into the brilliant waste of the sea.

"*Rome. . .*" The word soared at the people. "To the earthly father of us all . . . the Rock, guardian of the Throne of Peter . . . Christ's designate, and His Vicar on Earth . . . to beg wisdom of his understanding, mercy of his compassion, alms of his limitless bounty . . . in the name of the Christ we adore, whose honour is stained too often in this land. . . ."

There was more but it was lost in the noise of the crowd. The word spread like wildfire to the farthest members of the mob that a miracle was to be performed. John would go to Rome; he would fly; for a sign, he would walk on water. He would command the waves. . . . The more level-headed, still carried away, set up a cry for a boat; and a woman shrilled suddenly, her voice rising above the rest. "Thine, Ted Armstrong . . . Give him thine . . ."

The man addressed waved furious arms. "Peace woman, 'tis all I own. . . ." But the protest was lost, swept aside in a surging movement that bore John and his followers down the cliff path, through the singing stands of gorse and bramble that lined the sea. To the watching soldiers it was as if the mob thrust out arms into the water; men skidding and tumbling in mud, hauled the vessel to her slip, launched her down it. She lay heaving and rolling in the backwash of the waves; oars were shipped, John tumbled aboard. Girls swarmed atop the piles of lobster pots stacked and roped on the beach, climbed back up the cliffs under the reversed firehouse-spraying of the springs. The boat, cast off, corkscrewed violently, rolled to show her bilge, straightened as the wind caught her stump of mast, headed for the first of the seething ridges of white. To either side the vast headlands of peat, black iron against the glaring sky; in front the miles on flattened miles of water seething in over the rim of the world. The watchers, straining against the brilliance, saw the keel lift to a hammer blow, surge off one-sided into a trough. Swamped, the craft rose again tinier and dwindling, a dark blob against brightness. And again, farther out still

in the yeast-boiling and roaring surge of the sea ; till tired eyes, streaming and screwed against the wind, could no longer mark her progress against the tumbling plain of the ocean.

They hauled the greatgun up to the western headland, and primed her and loaded with canister ; she rumbled threatening over the brink as dusk was settling on the waste of water below. But she menaced an empty beach ; the whole huge crowd was gone. The soldiers stood-to till dawn, huddled in their greatcoats, squatting backs to the wind against the cold iron of the gun while the hurricane, dropping, blew itself away.

And the waves, frothing still, slapped at the upturned keel of a boat, urging it back gently toward the land.

— KEITH ROBERTS

EDITORIAL—*Continued from page 3*

readers about TRICON, the 24th World Science Fiction Convention which will be held on September the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th at the Sheraton-Cleveland Hotel in Cleveland, Ohio, which is in the United States of North America. Membership is one dollar for overseas fans (*that means us this time, of course*) and two dollars plus one dollar if you attend for all others. (*How's that again?*) Cheques should be made payable to "24th World Science Fiction Convention" and posted to P.O. Box 1372, Cleveland, Ohio 44103, USA. Additional information can be had from the same address. Toastmaster will be Isaac Asimov and the guest of honour is L. Sprague de Camp.

Frankly, I can't quite imagine Dr. Asimov in a red livery coat standing behind the Chairman's chair bellowing

"Me Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen . . ." but perhaps it means something else in the United States.

— KYRIL BONFIGLIOLI

The 70 m.p.h. limit prodded sports-car driver Bevan out of his recent silence to produce this bitter prediction of a day when the dead hand of the Traffic Warden will shadow every mile of English road.

THE PACE THAT KILLS

by Alistair Bevan

The car left the motorway with a prolonged shrieking of rubber on macadam and plunged down the thirty-odd feet of embankment shedding chunks of pink plastic padding as it rolled. Tinker swore violently and uselessly and steered his own vehicle onto the hard shoulder beside the twenty-foot gap in the barrier. He swung out and Johnny Morris followed, threshing his way from the cramped and illegal cockpit.

There was a bright, scorched smell. Way off down the grass the car had come to rest, lying on what was left of its roof. Three wheels thrust supplicatingly into the air; the fourth was two hundred yards away and still rolling, flashing back the sun, as brightly pink as a baby's fresh-scrubbed backside. Round the car too were scraps of pinkness, shreds torn from the safety cushioning. The ripped plastic was redder toward the centre, nastily organic. Smoke was drifting; Johnny saw the quick gout of an autoextinguisher. He leaned on the broken fencing and gulped, not wanting to move closer, seeing and hearing with the heightened perception of shock.

Tinker was already nearly at the wreck, half-running on the slope, turning back to wave and yell distantly. Johnny saw him stoop over the crumpled car and wave again. His own legs moved, pumping unwillingly, driving him forward and down across the grass. Behind him on the motorway the SafeTiPeds gurgled and bleated. The wreck was out of sight but the vehicle on the hard standing would

raise a buzzing shoal of complaints once the Roadusers reached the nearest of the Tattleboxes. The whole thing was crazy ; Johnny wanted out and knew he couldn't go.

The smell was worse where the slobbering of the extinguishers had killed the fire. A girl was lying in the wreck, seeming broken apart by the straps and bands of it that held her. Here a wrist, there an ankle ; hair, and blood. The blood was startlingly bright against the grass. Tinker was pulling and swearing ; there were metal cutters in the car they'd left, no time to go back. Another extinguisher blew, wetting Johnny's shoulder. He pulled at a wire that was tight round the victim's arm. Above on the road was the wailing of a siren.

Tinker was prising at a twisted subframe, shoulders flexing, the sweat standing on his forehead. The thing groaned, broke with a snap. Johnny unwound the wire, the throttle linkage, working wrist-deep in foam, the foam hindering now more than it helped. Some of the bubbles touched blood and reacted, frothing pinkly. He hauled at the victim, hands locked under her, forearms squashing her breasts. Her head hung limp, showing him a white parting on the scalp where the heavy hair fell forward. Tinker was swearing again ; Jonny concentrated on dragging the girl twenty yards from the motor he knew now wouldn't burn. The SafeTiPed still foamed desultorily, a bright self-salted slug.

There was blood on the girl's forearm and a great swatch of it across her face. It ran down her neck as they turned her, wetting bright halfmoons in the collar of her blouse. The cut was curved on her forehead, darker and glittering. Johnny's hands made a pad of a kerchief, pressed it against her face ; he was vaguely surprised at what he had done without thought.

There were two vehicles now on the hard shoulder. The bulging safety pads of the van were buttercup yellow, the colour of the long-disbanded A.A. The two men trotting across the grass wore black uniforms decorated on cuff and capband with the same sinister gold. The foremost Warden seemed pointlessly to be blowing a whistle. He carried in his hand his baton of office ; from time to time he paused to whirl it round his head. He stopped twenty

feet from Johnny, glaring and whooping for breath, a sallow-faced little man with a drooping moustache and faded pale blue eyes. "*My Sector*," he said half-hysterically. "*In my bleedin' Sector . . .*"

Tink was staring, eyes narrowed. *The car*, thought Johnny, still crouching. *No trouble. Remember the car . . .* The second patrolman was already poking in the ruins of the SafeTiPed. The hankie was bright and soaked; Johnny felt panic starting again. He said as quietly as he could, "Will you call an ambulance?" The girl twitched. *Please, God, not to let her wake up . . .* "She's very badly hurt," he said. "Will you call an ambulance?"

"Moira Alice Kelly, Mr. Bigge," said the Warden. "Address erased . . ."

"I'm in charge 'ere," said the little man. "Don't you go tellin' me what to do . . ." Tink's wrist was gripping Johnny's arm. Way off the ambulance was coming anyway, whickering over the grass. The Warden pulled the wet pad away. The cut looked as if it had grown. "*My Sector . . .*" he said again faintly. His head, bent close under Johnny's nose, smelled of floral hair oil.

His mate straightened up grunting, the red governorbox of the SafeTiPed in his hands. He dropped it down on the grass. The official seals were cut and bent away; the lid gaped, mute testimony of sin. The Warden hissed between his teeth. Something jiggling at his waist Johnny had taken for a first-aid kit; it was nothing of the sort. He watched helplessly while a plastic bag was pushed over the victim's mouth and nose. "Initial breath analysis impractical," intoned the minion of the law. His companion inscribed the statement in a leatherbound notebook, consulted the chronometer on his wrist and added the time. "Wind south-south west," said Johnny faintly. "B-backing . . ." Tinker squeezed his arm.

The helicopter landed. At last there were white coats, a stretcher, efficiency. The girl was lifted; she roiled her head, moaning a little now. A handbag lay on the grass, contents spilled. The hospital folk would have taken it, but it was confiscated by the Warden. He straightened slowly, icechip eyes glinting unpleasantly, wiping his fingers on a bandanna handkerchief. "I will now check you," he said to Johnny,

using the singsong intonation of unlettered officialdom. "In accordance with the powers invested in me by the Road Traffic Act of nineteen sixty-nine. *Ahem*. And subsequent Acts . . ."

Johnny swallowed, and inclined his head. "Speed Kills, Masterwarden," he said dutifully. "I am ready to co-operate . . ."

Johnny and Tink solemnly inflated the little plastic bags, and watched while reagents failed to turn their contents mauve.

The warehouse was situated in an old and disreputable part of the city. Over its doors was inscribed the faded legend **ATLAS MANUFACTURING CO.** Above were lines of roundtopped windows, the panes cracked and grey with dirt. Through them showed faintly the brown sides of old cardboard boxes. There was an air of dilapidation and ennui, a harsh Buffet quality about the pavements wet with rain.

The car turned cumbrously to point its padded nose at the doors. They grumbled open; the motor passed within, edging between tall stacks of crates. At the rear of the place ten feet of whitewashed and cobweb-hung wall made themselves silently and surprisingly scarce. Beyond was a fluoro-lit workspace. The walls were hung with fanbelts, head gaskets and valve lifters, all the paraphernalia of a garage; a long bench was scattered with tools, in a corner of the floor was a boarded pit. The car parked beside another, a low shape swathed with dustsheets. The wall section slid back into place with a hissing of hydraulics; Tinker writhed his way from the cab. Johnny followed him, patting the padded bonnet of the motor as he passed. The plastic squeaked and shifted under his hand.

In one wall of the workshop was a locked door. Tinker fingered the combination; the door swung open, revealing beyond itself a spiral stair. He clattered down it, Johnny following. The stair gave onto a passageway. The walls were of rough brick, whitewashed and lit at intervals by low-wattage lamps. Somewhere air-conditioning plant hummed steadily; the plenum effect brushed Johnny's face with a cool breeze.

A further door, metal-sheathed, opened onto a wide, low room. The two pushed through it, stood a moment while their eyes became used to the dimness. The study reflected the complicated personality of its owner. Opposite them an aquarium tank glowed softly, tetras flashing like short circuits among the weed. One end of the place was given over to shelves and cases; books and models, stacked in profusion, constituted a portable and highly individual motoring museum. Beside it was an unmade camp bed; at its head, on a Pembroke table, stood a tantalus with decanters of water and Scotch. Other ancient pieces of furniture, a Georgian console table, a yew wood secretaire, Sheraton style and Queen Anne chairs, were grouped in front of walls of whitened brick; a russet carpet tied the scheme together. In the far corner of the place a desk, topped with dark green leather, was lit by a slim Anglo-poise lamp. At the desk a man was sitting, back turned to the newcomers. They waited, unhappily. He let silence deepen before he spoke. Then, "You're a right pair of nits, are you not?" The voice was cultured, flat and softly unstressed.

"Hanssen, I—"

Peter Hanssen swung his chair abruptly, feet clear of the floor, braked with his heels on the carpet. "What were you driving?" he asked. "What had you got on the road?"

"The Elan," said Johnny unhappily. "Look, Hanssen, it was j—"

"Just one of those things, Johnny, there's a draught. Do something about it."

Johnny obediently closed his mouth.

Hanssen stubbed his cigarette, selected another from a box on the desk, inserted it carefully into an amber holder. "I will kill you," he said pleasantly, "fry you *à la Maryland*, and eat you piece by tiny disgusting piece, the very next time you display your more than monumental, your more than profound, your truly cosmic idiocy. Do I make myself quite clear? Do I leave within your microscopic brains the faintest shadow of doubt?"

Johnny shook his head unhappily. Useless to ask Hanssen how he knew; he made it his business to know everything.

"One question," said the other wearily. "Could you not simply have driven past?"

"I—"

"Who was in fact at the wheel?"

Tinker shuffled his feet. "I was . . ."

"All," said Hanssen, "is explained. You oversized bomb-head; how long did it take you to become as stupid as you are?" He waved a hand. "Don't bother with the estimate. Switch the tube on, will you, let's hear the end of this unsavoury affair . . ."

The incident naturally took first place in the bulletin, preceding an eyewitness report of the dropping of a small atomic bomb on Ghana. "At a few minutes after twelve hundred hours this morning," said the newscaster heavily, "an Accident took place in Sector Twelve, Subsection Five, of the Western London Traffic Zone. Masterwarden Horace J. Bigge, first to arrive on the scene of the disaster—"

"Liar—"

"Sharrap!"

—described the scene as gory and hideous. The Victim, Moira Alice Kelly, address unknown, was flown by police helicopter to the St. Martins Centre of Social Sciences, where she is still seriously ill. The governorbox of the SafeTiPcd had been tampered with and the vehicle was described by witnesses, some of whom are still being treated for shock, as easily exceeding forty miles an hour. Mr. Bigge, interviewed at our London news studios, said afterward, 'I can but repeat a phrase that by now should be known to all; Speed Kills. I hope, with my colleagues, that this dreadful proof will be taken afresh to the hearts of every man, woman and child in this grand old country of ours.' Presented with a personal message of congratulation from the King, Mr. Bigge said, 'I only done my duty.' Asked to comment further Mrs. the Transport Ministrix, The Honourable Mrs. Agatha Gladstone-Hadley, said, 'I can but endorse the sentiments expressed by our officer Mr. Bigge, and add my congratulations to those of His Majesty. We must redouble our efforts; the past two years have seen no less than three fatal accidents and seven cases of serious injury on the roads. This shocking, this dreadful toll can and must be checked; the evil of Speed must

finally be stamped out from our midst. Scientists at the ten-million-pound Centre of Road Safety are already examining the means by which the governor of the vehicle was reset—”

Hanssen rose impatiently and turned off the screen. “I’ve got it made,” said Tinker, jiggling with delight. “Stick of dynamite and a detonator. Start prodding round with the box and *poomph*. Look, Daddy, no hands . . .”

“Get lost,” said Hanssen tiredly. “As a special favour to me. For one morning, you’ve done more than enough. Go on, scat, the pair of you. I’ve got work to do . . .”

The armoured door closed silently. Hanssen sighed, lit his cigarette, stuck the holder in the corner of his mouth and sat staring at nothing in the dim-lit study. Then he turned back to the desk, clicked a switch and picked up a microphone. “Transcription, Connie,” he said. “Notes for the Western Sector quarter-annual.” He cleared his throat. “My friends,” he said. “The history of our Party, and of the war between the Drivers and the Peds that has so sadly handicapped this country, falls easily into two distinct parts. Prior to the mid-sixties the record of road transport in England was simply one of incompetence, inefficiency, inadequacy and Governmental dishonesty. Administration vied each with the next in devising new and viciously unfair methods of taxation; for the motoring public was considered, when it was considered at all, as the natural milch-cow of the bureaucratic state. Needless to say little of the money levied annually in tax was ever employed in road improvement, despite the efforts of such visionaries as the Honourable John Scott-Montagu, afterward Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, who as early as 1903 was pleading for recognition of the problems that would one day beset us all. The Motoring Act of that year, although enfranchising those pioneers who hitherto had taken their vehicles on the highway only under threat of arrest, was badly mutilated by the opponents of villainous petroleum; in fact the motor car would seem even at that early date to have established itself as a *leit-motif* in the perpetual war between the haves and the have-nots.

“After the middle nineteen-sixties events took a new and more sinister turn. The well-advanced necrosis of the

country's system of road communication interacted with the final victory of bureaucracy over intelligence to produce a state of affairs hitherto alien to patterns of British thought and later to British theories of justice. The relatively minor issue of road deaths had first been seized on by the aptly-named yellow press and inflated to mountainous proportions as a handy way of filling front pages between child murders, Royal scandals and the autobiographies of whores; but since no bureaucracy ever managed unaided to check any trend within itself, however dangerous or bizarre, the matter finally became a major factor in the shaping of governmental policies. Conservatism must bear the blame for the first genuinely retrogressive legislation but the banner was borne forward most enthusiastically by the Socialists, who found the belabouring of the discriminating motorist a cheap and convenient way of demonstrating their Love for the Masses while at the same time increasing by fines and by taxation the income to the country's exchequer.

"Another critical factor in the *débâcle* of commonsense was of course the class hatred that sprang up with such virulence in the so-called classless society of the mid-twentieth century. The phenomenon, often remarked at the time but never satisfactorily explained, can now be seen in perspective as the end result of a process that had begun a century earlier in the dark days of the industrial revolution. The rise to power of trade unionism had resulted with comparative suddenness in the creation of a plebeian ruling class, a political occurrence unique in British history. The reversal of fortunes had some odd side effects, not the least of which was the traumatic urge of the new aristocracy, who now owned more collective power than singly they had ever desired, to return to the uterine insignificance that for centuries had been their lot. That urge, regrettably, could never be fulfilled; instead the rulers of our True Democracy attempted to close unlooked-for vistas of thought by supporting any and all legislation aimed at enforcing greater conformity to mass ideals. For make no mistake, my friends, intellectual and economic uniformity were the principles truly invoked in 1966 and the years that followed. But what neither highbrow nor lowbrow realized

(and there were many of both, on both sides of the fence) was that they abetted not their own parties but the painful groping to the light, the fell self-seeking, of Bureaucracy ; that long-legged Beastie that had stalked the twentieth century, that brainless, joyless, sexless entity that owns no creed, that has no *raison d'être*, no faith but the Power of the State and of itself. The Thing in fact against which the British had so often gone to war . . .

"However that might be, the country saw a succession of speed limits that declined from an initial seventy in 1965 to a national maximum five years later of forty miles an hour. Statistics, produced in a steady stream, vindicated the restrictions ; and although the White Paper of 1970, summing up the results of the first five years of control as an overall reduction in *per capita* accident rate of forty-five per cent, was later proved to have been based solely on figures for the Rural District of Stoke and Oxshott, little outcry was made. Possibly a more accurate estimate was that prepared by the then newly constituted Ministry of Road Safety, whose investigators found that over the half decade the law could definitely claim the saving of the lives of thirteen humans, four dogs and the Transport Minister's Persian cat. This of course was at the cost of eighteen governmental suicides and the murder by stoning, hanging, garrotting and dropping in the Thames of thirty-five Traffic Wardens ; but these statistics were naturally played down in the interests of the greatest good.

"Meanwhile the ratification of the Road Traffic Act of 1969 had changed the basic concept of British law. The Warden organisation, by this time completely autonomous, was armed, and given powers over the ordinary citizen that virtually amounted to life and death. Motorists could be accosted at all times, and were in fact frequently dragged from their beds to undergo breathalyser tests and other examinations of a more fundamental nature. The results, friends, lie all about us today. We stand condemned, murderers from the cradle to the grave ; and in fact it could be said that Socialism, via its attack on that section of society labouring under the criminal tag of Motorists, first formulated and applied the civic definition of Original Sin.

"The end of course could not be indefinitely delayed. The introduction of an all-over speed limit of twenty miles an hour, coupled with the passing of the Act enabling the Wardens to enforce the fitting of governorboxes to all road vehicles, finally toppled the administration of 1970, returning the Conservative government of 1971. The collapse was largely brought about by mass voting swings engineered in desperation by the unions controlling the savagely battered motor industry. The new administration started well, with a daring increase of the national speed limit to thirty-five; but a singularly disastrous foreign policy led almost at once to the collapse of the pound, annoying intensely the then Sheikh of Bahrain. His Highness finally pulled the plug, halving at one stroke the British gold reserve; it was a blow from which the national economy never recovered.

"The government fell; and the Socialist régime of 1972, largely we must suppose from pique, instantly nationalised the motor industry. It was the final straw. Barricades appeared in the streets of Oxford, Birmingham and Coventry while the Cowley Commune declared a state of anarchy and marshalled its forces for a mass attack on Whitehall. Desperate measures were taken, including a last-ditch attempt to sway the electorate by knighting several pop singers and reducing the voting age to fourteen. All were of no avail. A new night, an economic dark age, descended on Great Britain; and although the reports of the trade in human flesh in Regents Park must largely be discounted as exaggerations we did see an occupation by American and Canadian forces and the assassination of most of the members of the coalition Cabinet in the Downing Street Bomb Plot. From that blackest era of our history emerged the two great forces whose interplay has shaped the society in which we live. No longer Tory and Labour, no longer the Haves and the Have-Nots, but a division far simpler and more deadly. The Drivers, and the Peds.

"During the first Ped administration all motoring clubs and organisations, both national and local; were outlawed. Brands Hatch and Silverstone circuits, along with half a hundred private tracks scattered through the country, were ritually destroyed; and while the rest of the world tittered or stood aghast, a programme for the breeding of number-

less horses was solemnly undertaken. The project, noble in conception, failed ; we lived, despite the tenets of our leaders, in the twentieth century. The motor vehicle once more began to pervade our roads ; but it was a motor vehicle with a difference. The SafeTiPed, that pink balloon, that unspeakable nexus, that Cloud Seven on which we all perforce must float. Rationalisation is complete, Pedestrianism triumphant. England at last is at peace with herself ; the tranquil content of the cabbage patch reigns over all, the happy anonymity of the anthill. While the Individual withers, and the World is more and more . . .

"Friends, we of the Driving Party ask ourselves if these things truly must be. Have individualism and free will survived the onslaught of the Armada, the massing of the Grand Army, the terror of the *Wehrmacht*, only to sink beneath a self-created Bureaucracy? We feel the answer is no. We *know* there is another course ; and we refuse, categorically, to fall down and worship before the Golden Calf of Normality. Hounded we may be and outlawed ; but therein lies our strength. And we hope too, salvation ; the salvation not only of ourselves but of all others who still might feel the stirrings of individuality. Who may in fact remember that once, long ago, they were British . . ."

Hanssen leaned back, blew a smoke ring and watched it float, paling and expanding, to the ceiling. "All for now, Connie," he said briskly. "Develop that into the Party Line, hard sell. Couple of hundred words should do it, you know the score. I'm going out for a drink ; somehow I feel I could use it . . ."

The girl sat propped up on her pillows, face pale under the glaring lights. Her temple and cheek were still covered by heavy pads of gauze ; her one visible eye moved restlessly, feverishly bright. Beside her a houseman checked her pulse, consulted his watch and nodded. "Gentlemen," he murmured, "you may begin your investigation." There would be no false answering ; the patient was shot full to the ears with scopolamine.

Masterwarden Bigge glanced round at his colleagues and cleared his throat importantly. Public acclaim, if it had not physically increased his stature, had puffed his chest and

given to his eyes the burning glow of the zealot. "Your name," he announced to the patient. "You will tell us your name." Beside him a camera dollied forward for a close-up; millions caught the flat whisper of the answer.

"Moira Alice Kelly . . ."

"Moira Kelly," said Mr. Bigge, drumming his fingers on his black-uniformed knee, "you stand accused of the gravest crime recognised by English law; the crime of Speeding. You stand accused of wanton Lust, of the naked will to murder. How do you make answer?"

Silence, while the girl seemed to puzzle over the words. Finally, "I did not wish . . . to kill . . ." The syllables came limpingly, blurred by drugs and pain.

Mr. Bigge coughed again, crossed his booted legs and pulled at his moustache. Badly conducted, this interview could be disastrous; the watching masses could easily be swung to sympathy for the accused. "Did you," asked the Masterwarden finally, "tamper, knowingly and with malice aforethought, with the governorbox of your vehicle?" He pronounced the last word carefully, giving full value to each of its syllables.

"Yes . . ."

"Were you aware at the time of your action that you were behaving contrary to the tried and established laws of this realm, that your behaviour was in fact malicious and selfish, that you were placing in mortal jeopardy the lives of your innocent fellow beings?"

"I was aware . . . that it was beyond the law."

"When did your illegal act take place?"

"The morning . . . the morning . . ." The patient rolled her head miserably, seeming confused. "Come," said Mr. Bigge, "I must insist that you reply." A tear coursed instantly across Moira's cheek. The Masterwarden swore under his breath.

The houseman leaned forward quickly. "The patient is suffering a deep trauma," he said. "Amnesia is commonly experienced in cases of this nature."

The situation was saved. Mr. Bigge regarded the doctor icily. "Of that," he said, "I was in fact aware . . ." He turned back to the girl. "It is the contention of the State and of this Tribunal," he said roundly, "that you have

succumbed to that blackest of temptations, the Urge to Drive. That you are not in fact a Roaduser ; that you have cut yourself off, wantonly, from the innocent, decent mass of your fellow beings. That you have studied, in secret and alone, those black Disciplines long since proscribed and condemned, placed beyond the reach of rational men. I propose to establish this beyond doubt. You will answer what I ask ; and you will answer truthfully. Do you understand?"

"Yes . . ."

The Masterwarden consulted a typewritten slip. "What," he asked, twisting his mouth at the unpleasantness of the question, "was the largest vehicle ever to race at Brooklands?"

A pause ; then, "The Higham Special," said Moira dreamily. "Powered by a vee-twelve Liberty engine of twenty-seven litres."

Mr. Bigge winced as though struck ; then he rallied. "I see. What do, or what did, the initials A.C. stand for?"

"Auto-Carrier. The firm was founded in 1904 to manufacture commercial vehicles."

"I see. In what year was the first hill climb at Shelsley Walsh?"

"Nineteen . . . oh five . . ."

The questioning proceeded. The definition of the Treasury Rating ; Bugatti's Christian name ; the year of Zborowski's death ; the date of Moss's retirement. Mr. Bigge's lips set in a whiter and harder line ; his moustache bristled and quivered ; his eyes snapped with their reforming zeal. And when at last he closed his black leather book, and drew over his nobbled hands his black leather gloves, the fate of Moira Alice Kelly was sealed.

A bright rectangle sailed back into blankness as Hanssen killed the videoscreen. He frowned, squeezed his lower lip into a vee, raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "Well," he said cheerfully, "that, I take it, is that . . ."

Tinker, resting brawny forearms on the top of the telly-box, narrowed his eyes. "Hanssen," he said ominously, "we're going to have to get her . . ."

"Out of the question, dear chap," said Hanssen genially.

He leaned back to examine faultlessly manicured nails. "They'll have her tied up every way from Christmas. Special details, security guards . . . can't consider it."

"Now listen here a minute, Hanss—"

"And you, listen to me." Peter Hanssen sat up sharply, opening surprisingly brilliant light-green eyes. "Tinker, you're a bloody fool. One day, now you just hear me through, you'll get yourself hung, and drawn, and quartered, and us along with you. No, don't yap back, I get tired of hearing you." He fanned his hands impatiently. "First that gag with the Elan. Stopping for a shunt . . ."

"Well what would you have done?"

"Driven past," said Hanssen icily. "Now listen. We're an extremist group, OK. We believe in the Party, we want the Party to win. But we're not here, and this you know as well as I do, we're not here to start a private war. In just six months there'll be an election, you can take that from me. And the Drivers are going in, now that comes from the top. Anything we do to prejudice that—"

Tinker pulled from his powerful head the old straw hat he habitually wore, slammed it onto the carpet. "Hanssen," he said. "Oh, Hanssen, haven't you got a soul?" He pouted, pulling at the hem of his sweater. "Owwwuh," he said. "She's a little peach, Hanssen. Didn't you see the freckles? And the little tear? Now you know what they're going to do with her, you worked it out? They'll shave all her hair. An' open her scalp, an' trepan her skull. And *bzz, bzz, bzz*, at the little white fibres . . ."

"Spare us," said Hanssen wearily, "the ghastly details . . ."

"I don't *wanna* spare 'em . . . !" Tinker howled, exasperated; the straw hat suffered again. "Hanssen, I can't stand it. I gotta *do* something; if you won't, I will. And I tell you you can't stop me—"

"I could put a bullet through your vast thick head," said Hanssen cuttingly. "Or maybe through something delicate. Tinker, you've got more brains in the arse of your pants than ever grew between your ears—"

"*The Hell!*"

"SHARRAP!"

"Oh dear," said Hanssen. "I get so tired, I really do . . ." He looked round at the others in the room, and back to

Tinker's glowering face. "I take it the company is of a mind with our . . . ah . . . colleague?"

Johnny Morris wagged his shoulders self-consciously. "It's murder, Hanssen," he said. "What they'll do to her. I reckon m-maybe we ought to try. Can't do us any harm with the Party. Good publicity."

"Oh yes," said Hanssen. "It shall advantage more than do us wrong. I've heard that line somewhere before. What about the rest of you? Sue? Tony? Richard?"

Uncertain mumblings. Sue Mercer, sturdy and brown-haired, fixed gorgous eyes on Hanssen and rubbed her nose reflectively. "I think you're outvoted, Peter. After all we are an Action Group."

"*Einsatzgruppe*," said Hanssen bitterly. "You'll get all the action you can handle out of this one. This is Trouble, I'll tell you that for a start."

"How do you know?"

"Divination by sieve and shears. The tealeaves looked ugly too. Tinker, you maudlin great ape, have you worked out how we can lift her?"

"Yeah." Tinker heaved himself off the tellybox, unrolled a wall map. At his touch a lighting trough flicked on, glaring from the white paper with its cobweb-maze of streets. "Now then, here's the Social Centre. So. And here . . . Saint Paul's Therapeutic. The State Home for the Bewilderced. Here's the only practicable route between the two." He slashed in a zigzag in coloured crayon. "Here . . . is where we pull the job."

"A minute." Hanssen was leaning back, fingers clasped round one knee. "Why are we presuming the . . . ah . . . goods will be transferred to Saint Pauls?"

"Because they don't do laser leucotomy at the Social Centrc. And Saint Pauls is a specialist hospital. Anyway I got it from the horse's mouth." He smirked. "Felicity Martin . . ."

"Ah yes, Felicity Jane," said Hanssen reflectively. "Nice little piece of crackling, as I remember. Still knocking it off with her neurosurgeon pal, I take it?"

"Aye."

"What did you promise her in return for grassing? Or was it a simple case of animal magnetism?"

Tinker looked uncomfortable. "Said she could have a run . . ."

"In what?"

"The . . . er . . . Speed Six."

"You bastard," said Hanssen evenly. "Continue."

Tinker bowed, gravely. The crayon became busy again, sketching in details.

Tinker waited nervously, fingers drumming a tattoo on the rim of the wheel. From time to time he drew violently on a cigarette; the flares of light showed up the illicit details of the cab. Beneath the moulded pink slabs of cushioning lurked an ancient Lotus Elan; the escape car. Across the road Johnny Morris lounged uneasily. Johnny had opted for the worst job of all; driving the ambulance, the red herring, through the maze of levels that lay behind the reconstructed Ludgate Hill. Fifty yards down the road a SafeTiPed was parked; Sue Mercer crouched beside it fiddling with a jack and one front wheel.

The plan was basically simple. A hundred yards away loomed the mouth of the Ludgate Underpass, from which at any moment the ambulance would emerge. Sue's task would be to ram it. Then would come the ticklish bit: disposing, with some rapidity, of the half dozen Wardens and police who could be expected to be travelling with the vehicle. Members of the Action Group, at present mingling innocently with the strollers-by, would perform that duty, losing themselves afterward in the back streets of the area. Johnny would drive the ambulance on at its highest speed while the 'goods'—one Moira Kelly, now officially slated for Personality Correction—were transferred to Tinker's care. The real escape route had been chosen for its unlikeness; back past the Social Centre, out through the bright lights of the West End. If challenged, the Lotus would use its speed; and affairs would then be in the lap of the gods. Tink stroked the Saint Christopher medallion round his neck and offered up a brief and fervent prayer.

He stiffened. Across the street, moving purposefully, strode a small and black-clad figure, golden bands gleaming on hatbrim and cuffs. Past the muffled Elan, toward Sue and the SafeTiPed. Tinker held his breath. Another twenty

yards, ten, five . . . the Warden was passing . . . and no. He stopped; Tink saw the girl straighten, slowly and unwillingly. He looked back at the underpass. Still quiet.

Sue opened the car door, lifted her handbag from the seat. Papers were exchanged; driving licence, insurance, certificates of physical and mental health, optician's report, psycho-chart, testimonials and referee-list, three-month test chit; all the paraphernalia of the twenty-first century Road-user. A torch flashed as the man began to scan the forms, reading with deliberate slowness.

"Little bastard . . ."

The words were jerked from Tinker, savagely. Sue smiled, clasping her hands; the torch shone into her eyes, checking pupil contraction. The papers were handed back; for a moment he thought she was clear, then the Warden produced from his satchel a bulky package. Some unidentifiable manoeuvres, and a shoulder-high canvas screen began to erect itself on the sidewalk. Tinker groaned; beneath the underpass the glow of headlights showed distantly.

He opened the car door. Sue was shrugging and smiling, arguing with the patrolman while she cast desperate glances at the road behind her. Johnny had stepped forward uncertainly; a nod from Tink, a jerk of the head and he fell into step beside him. They converged on the SafeTiPed, the cosh already swinging in Tinker's hand. Twenty feet away, ten; and the Warden still unsuspecting, struggling with the mechanism of his screen. Tinker padded up behind him. "T-trouble, Masterwarden?" asked Johnny pleasantly; and the man straightened to face him.

Thunk . . .

Twelve inches of loaded rubber hose flailed briefly. The yellow-banded hat tilted to one side, rolled along the pavement. Sue half-screamed; the body sagged, grunting, into Johnny's arms. No time for niceties; the patrolman was bundled out of sight in the shadows, Tink headed back for the Elan at a flat gallop.

Shouting somewhere; he slammed the car door, gunned her engine. The lights were very close; Sue turned the SafeTiPed out from the kerb barely in time. Tink heard a screech of brakes, a satisfying crunch. A hubcap bounded across the road; he pulled the stockinet mask down over

his head, let in the clutch and guided the motor to the scene of disaster.

He saw the mistake almost instantly. The holdup had been anticipated ; torches flashed as a dozen Wardens and police converged on the bloodwagon. Barked words of command and the mass of humanity struggling by the back doors parted unwillingly. Two Drivers already lay face down in the road, thumped by the coshes of the guards. Tink saw riotguns levelled, and swerved. A hammering ; plastic chips flew from the bonnet, he felt a tyre blow. He ground to a stop and struggled out, arms held high above his head. It was useless ; they were caught, fairly and squarely, in a trap of their own devising.

The noise of the helicopter battered back from the fronts of the buildings. The machine swung low, belly lamps glaring, flattening clothes and hair with the vertical gale from its vanes. Tink, staring, saw rope ladders sway against the brilliance. Beside him a Warden stood dazed, mouth ajar, gas grenade still poised to hurl.

Only one thing could pierce the din ; the machine's loud-hailer. *"Throw down your weapons,"* it boomed. *"On your faces, Wardens, in the name of Saint Christopher . . ."* Tinker's held breath escaped with a vast whooshing. Hanssen, typically, had made his own arrangements . . .

For a moment the patrolmen wavered ; then gas bombs burst among them, lobbed in a circle from the machine. Soft thuddings, and the scene was obscured by whirling vapour. Tink wavered, caught on a fine edge of indecision ; made his choice and began to fight his way, eyes streaming, through the mob. The disabled Lotus would have to be abandoned, the Warden was far more important. The little man had seen Sue unmasked, the others too maybe. If they left him, that was the end of an Action Group.

The patrolman was sitting up, holding his head with one hand and fumbling for his pistol with the other. Tink kicked him peremptorily across the jaw, stooped to swing him over his shoulder, shouted knowing nobody would hear. The chopper was already rising away. He howled again ; a bad moment, then the hailer burst into curdling profanity. A ladder swung at his head ; he gripped the rungs desperately, felt the ground snatched from under his

feet. Seconds later he was high over Saint Pauls, hearing the wind rush in his ears, clinging to his burden while from below came the scattered plopping of carbine fire. The ladder shortened, winching him toward the cab.

Masterwarden Bigge sat nervously, still fingering his scalp, the focus of a blazing bank of lights. Behind the lamps the masked and shadowy figures watched impassively.

"I knows you," said the Warden, kneading his hands. "I knows you all. You'll not get away wi' this. Oh, no . . ."

"Nasty little man," said Sue. "Tried to make me pee into a bottle . . . what shall we do with him, people?"

"Hang him!"

"The garotte!"

"No! Something slow!"

"Death of a thousand cuts!"

"Choke him with exhaust fumes!"

"Tie him between two fenders! Tug o' war!"

"Poetic!"

"Hurrah!"

"No . . ." Hanssen held up his arms for quiet. He approached the sweating patrolman and leaned to stare at him, hands gripping the back of a chair, eyes glittering horribly through his mask. "What tales of ghastliness," he asked, "could this man tell? What houndings, what atrocities has he not committed in the name of Bureaucracy? Of the State? How many hapless drivers has he condemned to the ranks of the Peds? How many rot in jail on his account? How many breathalyser bags have been filled at his request, how many innocent virgins has he forced to wee into his horrid little bottles? What fate can we devise for him, what punishment truly worse than death?" His voice dropped to a throaty murmur. "You are in the hands of the Driving Party, little man," he whispered. "*Expect no mercy . . .*"

Masterwarden Bigge began to twitch, puppet-fashion. "I've done nothink," he said. "No, nothink. 'Cept my duty . . ." He swallowed convulsively, Adam's apple prominent against his thin neck. "I'll . . . I'll tell you what

I'll do," he said desperately. "I won't say nothink, see? Nothink. I won't talk, I won't give yer away. I promise . . ."

"What are promises," asked Hanssen mournfully, "to us outcasts? To we people of the shadows? It cannot be . . ." He reached forward to grip the sleeve of Mr. Bigge. The Warden jerked away, terrified. "See this man," said Hanssen. "This little man who has always Done his Duty. Mark him well, my brothers . . ." He turned the Warden's cuff. "See these dainty hands. These fingers never steeped themselves in mortal sin; never gripped the wheel of a car, never sullied themselves with her oil. These tiny feet have never caressed throttle or brake. *Have they?*"

Mr. Bigge attempted to draw himself up. "No," he said faintly. "No, I do not drive. I am a Masterwarden, driving is for my underlings . . ."

"No," said Hanssen, "he does not drive. The Warden, the guardian of decent wholesome living, the gourmet of temporal sin, would not so sully his palate, destroy that fine nose of his that so often has scented Crime. Brothers, the direction of our punishment is clear. Is it not?"

A rising murmur of excitement. Hanssen's voice rode above it. "Masterwarden Bigge," he boomed triumphantly, "we, the Drivers, thus pass on you collective sentence. *You shall be deflowered . . .*"

Mr. Bigge, sensing at last the horror prepared for him, began to scream and writhe. His efforts were of no avail; the masked figures swirled, dragging him to the centre of the room. "*The Bible*," intoned Hanssen in a voice of doom. Mr. Bigge's hands were pinioned; and a great book was banged down on his knees. "See the faces of depravity," hissed Peter Hanssen. "See the killers, the murderers, the viceroys of sin . . ." The Warden writhed again, arching his back; but his eyes were drawn down, with horrid fascination, to the pages that were turned for him.

They were all there; Chapman and Honda, Enzo Ferrari and the brothers Maserati, Bentley and Rolls and Le Compte de Dion, glaring up from their ancient spotty prints: Bouton and Pomeroy, Lanchester, Bugatti, Rudd; and the drivers, Lancia and Rosemeyer, Fangio, Gonzalez, Carraciola; Count Varzi and Nuvolari, Castellotti and Hawthorn and Clarke; and Moss, greatest and nearly last.

Mr. Bigge gobbled ; his eyes bulged ; a sheen of saliva showed on his chin.

The ordeal ended finally ; but worse was to come. "Bring me," cried Hanssen, "the sacred vials . . ." The bottles, unstoppered, were tilted ; the Warden felt their contents run gummily on his forehead, mingle with his thinning hair. Oil from a Mascrati ; rad water from a Bugatti ; brake-juice from an XKE. He writhed, half unconscious now, and dimly felt himself lifted.

They forced him into the Bentley, arranged his feet on her pedals, curled his fingers on the rim of her wheel. He smelled the ancient smell of her, the stink of leather and oil ; her bonnet vibrated as she was swung up and fired. Her exhaust boomed in his ears ; his head lolled ; he was barely aware of the flashbulbs that blazed, recording the scene for all time.

He was hauled from the motor. His legs, jellied, refused to take his weight. Hanssen turned from the grovelling man, leaned his hands against the wall. "Let him go," he said. His voice was flat, all passion spent. "Let him go, we need detain him no more . . ."

Mr. Bigge staggered down an alley between dim, high-walled buildings. The night wind soughed past him, lifting his hair ; to either side the warehouses jerked by, window sockets black and accusing as the empty eyes of skulls. In his nostrils fumes of petrol and oil still reeked ; he touched his face to feel the dread stickiness there. "No," he moaned. "No . . ." But it was true ; the nightmare was real. He fell to his knees, clawing at the collar of his jacket. Sullied, befouled . . . no more could he wear the proud black of a Warden, no more strut in the public gaze in the knowledge of duty well and nobly done. They had ruined him forever, those fiends from the Pit ; never, never again could he hold up his head.

His fingers, falling slack, touched the empty holster at his hip, fumbled at the leather. He raised his eyes hopelessly. Ahead of him, at the end of the alley, lights of scarlet and lights of yellow spun and swam. The Road, once his proud domain, that could be his no longer . . . His vision spangled with tears ; he rose staggering, unconscious of his actions, ran fast on wobbling legs toward the brilliance.

Brakes squealed, hooters belched and gurgled ; Mr. Bigge bounced screaming from safety pads, cannonned off springy rubber bumpers, was saved time and again by the devious laws of the realm. But no law, alas, can save men from themselves ; and the motor car that finally came to rest on his chest, though diminutive and safe to a degree, still interfered with his breathing effectively enough.

The study was wide and dim, lit by a single Anglepoise lamp above the leather-topped desk. At the desk a man was sitting, back turned to the room. The girl approached uncertainly, feet soundless on the carpet. Behind her the door whiffled silently closed.

He stayed still, seeming unconscious of her presence ; but when she paused he spun the chair, braking with his heels. She stood tensed, staring. The lamplight left his eyes shadowed, glistened on his broad forehead. His hair, receding, was combed in flat soft wisps across his skull ; his face was heavy, long in nose and jaw, the skin pulled taut and smooth across the cheekbones. There was about him something of the bland intentness of a bull terrier.

The pause lengthened ; then he smiled, and the quality of silence was transformed. "Miss Kelly," he said, "how very nice to meet you, my name's Hanssen. Tell me, how do you feel?"

"All right . . ." She crossed her arms, rubbing her shoulders and shivering. "All right, I think . . . May I sit down?"

He fetched a chair, instantly attentive. "I'm so sorry. Most thoughtless of me, this must all have been very distressing . . . Have our people looked after you?"

She nodded wanly. "Yes . . ." She looked round her frowning. "Please . . . where am I?"

He shrugged. "The exact location isn't important. I assure you no harm will come to you, you're quite safe. This is the headquarters of an Action Group. As you've no doubt gathered, we are Drivers . . ."

She put her face in her hands, rubbing her forehead with her fingertips. "Gosh I'm . . . so confused . . . Did it all really happen?"

"It did."

"Please," she said. "The . . . little man, the Warden. What happened to him?"

He frowned, toying with the paperknife on the desk. "He's dead," he said. "I'm sorry."

"Dead?" She stared at him, wide-eyed and tousled. The word seemed to hang between them in the air, heavily.

"No one was to blame," said Hanssen. "Believe me, we did him no harm. In fact it could be said, he died of Principles."

She pressed her knuckles against her mouth. "Poor little man," she said. "Somehow I was so . . . sorry for him."

"Yes," said Hanssen, "so were we. We hope, truly, he found a happy release."

"What did you . . . do to him?"

"I told you. Nothing."

Her voice was very low. "What will you . . . do to me?"

"Nothing."

"It's all sort of anticlimactic," she said. "I don't know how to talk to you, you see. What you want me to say. There's no real . . . starting point, is there?"

He crossed to the side table, poured a drink. She heard the decanter tinkle as he set it down. He handed her the glass. "It's brandy," he said. "Don't worry, it isn't drugged or anything. Just sip it slowly. You'll be all right soon."

She warmed the glass automatically between her palms, dipped her nose to the rim. "I'm not panicky really," she said. "Just confused . . ."

He watched her from the desk, expressionlessly, fingers steeped under his chin. She drank, coughed slightly and blinked. Set the glass down on the desk top and accepted the cigarette he offered. The room was silent; in the quiet the buzz of the air-conditioning plant seemed very loud. "There'll be a terrific fuss," she said. "You've got yourselves into dreadful trouble over me." A long pause; then, "Why are you looking like that?"

"It's nothing."

"Please . . ."

"I was wondering," he said broodingly.

"What?"

"We lost a fine motor car and two good men. I was wondering whether you were worth it."

She shivered again. "That's not very fair . . ."

"No," he said. "It isn't." He continued to stare, touching his teeth with his fingernails. Then abruptly, "Are you afraid of me?"

"N-no. Should I be?"

"No . . ."

Another wait. She flicked her hair selfconsciously; she smoothed it again at once, but not before he'd seen the red curving halfmoon of the scar. "It's funny," she said.

"What is?"

"I don't know really. All the years sort of dreaming and wondering, never expecting to meet anybody . . . well, like you. Not knowing whether you existed or not, wondering if the world was really nothing but Wardens and SafeTi-Peds, stuffed all full of people who didn't . . . care."

He stayed silent. Then, "Do I exceed your expectations, or fall short?"

"I don't know yet," she said frankly. She took another sip at the brandy. "I suppose you want me to talk now," she said. "Tell you about how it happened and all that."

"Do you want to talk?"

"That isn't an answer."

"It wasn't supposed to be."

"I see," she said. She studied the tip of her cigarette. "I'm sort of on trial, aren't I? You didn't do all this for nothing. You want something back."

"It could be," he said gently, "that we have Principles too."

"Yes," she said. "The world's all a mass of Principles, isn't it? They grind up against each other and conflict, and nobody ever knows really where they are."

No answer.

"It . . . started with my father," she said. "He was middle-aged when I was born, when he died he was quite old. He remembered when things were . . . different. He told me once, when he was young he saw Moss drive."

Hanssen seemed to relax fractionally. "Did your father teach you about motor cars?"

"No. Well, not at first. He had a lot of books. That was years ago, before you could get into trouble for being anti-social if you had too many. Some of them were always kept

locked away. They were in a big old chest, I'd never seen it open. One day I found the key. I was quite small. All the books were about cars. There were models too. Like yours. I'd never seen anything like them, they were so beautiful. They made me cry.

"Father was furious when he found out. He said he was going to beat me for what I'd done, then he said . . . he couldn't beat a child of his for wanting to live and run about, and use air without counting the breaths. He often said things like that, he was a . . . strange man. After that he let me see the books as much as I wanted. I nearly wore them out looking at them. I can still remember them almost word for word."

"What happened to them?"

"I've still got them. They're hidden. You can have them if you want. I think I'd like you to."

Hanssen shook his head. "We'll talk about it another time, just now would be dangerous. When did you learn to drive?"

"Father taught me, just before he died. On a SafeTiPed. The things he called it, you never would believe them. They were appalling . . . After he died I . . . kept it. The Wardens weren't very happy about it. They kept checking me nearly every day but I was careful never to drink anything so I was all right. I was frightened once, I ate a chocolate and there was rum in it and I didn't know. But they let me off. The bag didn't go quite the right colour. I suppose in their way they're fair."

"Was that the motor you . . . er . . . ?"

She bit her lip. "Yes. I . . . don't know what happened to me quite. It was just one day I . . . felt I couldn't go on any more not knowing, I had to feel what it was like to drive really fast just once. I felt if I didn't I'd burst."

"How did you rig the governor?"

"It wasn't clever at all really. The lock number's on the bottom of the casting, you can see it with a compact mirror. I was a comptometer operator in a big garage near Slough. I just stole a key."

"But you didn't know that in the interests of Road Safety, a Ped's steering assembly is built to fly apart at fifty?"

"No," she said quietly. "I didn't know that."

He stood up. "Well, I think that's quite enough for one night. I'm sorry I've kept you so long, you look very tired."

She smiled faintly. "I feel dead."

"Yes," he said. "Yes, of course." He opened the study door for her. "Now I'm afraid we've got a slight problem," he said. "You'll have to stay in the flat for a time, and there's nobody else here except me. The gang's had to split up, you see, they're all indulging in diversionary operations because there's rather a large-scale search going on. Tinker's driving a Healey Silverstone down the Great West Road, Sue's dropping thunderbolts in all the Tattleboxes she can find, all sorts of funny things are happening. I have to stop here to co-ordinate everything, but you'll be perfectly all right." He opened a door leading off the corridor. "I think you'll find everything you want; and there's a bolt on the inside if it makes you feel better." He smiled. "Goodnight, Moira. See you in the morning."

She stood watching him walk away, with no expression on her face.

Hanssen fell off the bed, sat up swearing. "What in the name of ten thousand bloody devils . . ." He got up, fumbled for the switch and smacked on the roomlights. A short quilted gown hung across a chairback; he shrugged himself into it, yanking the sash round his waist. He scurried to the door; the second scream hit him in the face as he opened it, seeming solidly to fill the air of the corridor.

"*Moira . . . !*"

A sobbing, dimly audible. He banged at her door. "Moira, what is it? Can I come in?" He turned the latch without waiting for an answer. The door opened; he clicked the switch of the bedside lamp, saw a terrified white face. She clung to him miserably, trying to keep the counterpane under her chin. "They were all killed," she said, "because of me . . ."

"What *are* you talking about . . . ?" He rocked her, squatting on the bed. "It's all right," he said. "It's all right . . . It's dawn; the cars are in their garages, the dead back in their graves . . ." Her hair was across his face; he rubbed her back, kissing her forehead, feeling with his lips

the faint mark of the scar. "Here," he said, pulling at the blankets. "You'll catch your death . . ."

"I was . . . drcaming . . ." She shuddered against his shoulder. "In the . . . ambulance, when the bump came. I . . . remembered. The fence breaking and the . . . car going across the grass and seeing the wheel run away and . . . knowing I was crashing and there was n-nothing I could do, I couldn't . . . stop . . . And the . . . bang, the terrible bang . . ." She gripped him convulsively. "In the dream," she said, "I wasn't . . . knocked out. I was . . . running and the blood was all coming and I was s-screaming and nobody would help . . ."

"Don't," he said, frowning. "You're all right now, now don't don't don't. Moira, *stop it*, do you hear?"

She shivered and clung tighter. "Don't be . . . angry. Peter, don't go away . . ."

He was quiet, enjoying holding her. Her arms were wide at the tops and brownly strong. He sat a long time while sobbing turned to sniffs. Then, "Sometimes you lose," he said, smiling over her shoulder. "Other times, you win . . ."

"W-what?" Not looking up.

"Hmm . . . Nothing. Forget it. Talking to myself."

"Talk to me," she said. "Please . . ."

"What?"

"Anything. Just talk."

Humorously. "What about?"

"Anything. Anything at all. Please . . ."

He frowned. "The medieval Saints," he said finally, "took a very dim view of marriage. Its only real advantage was, it generated fresh virgins."

"What?"

"I was explaining an Attitude," he said gently. He stroked her hair. "It's a sort of riddle. In two halves."

"What's the . . . rest?"

"The other half is an epigram. 'There can be no romantic love in a country that lacks the bidet'."

"I don't . . . understand . . ."

"You're sleepy," he said. "Try and rest."

"No . . ." Frightened again. "Tell me about . . . about yourselves . . ."

"What, about ourselves?"

"Everything. Everything there is."

"Everything isn't very much," he said quietly.

"Please . . ."

"Well," he said. "We break the law. In all sorts of ways, but mostly with our motor cars. We drive them very fast at night, and the Wardens get cross and chase us about. Sometimes they catch us but not very often. There isn't anything else to know."

She was quiet again awhile. Then. "You are a strange man."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Because you are. You don't . . . care really, do you? About the Drivers and the Peds and all . . ."

"You must go back to sleep." He was tracing patterns on her shoulder with a fingertip. "It's very early yet. Only just after dawn."

"No . . ."

"You'll get a chill."

"I shan't. Please tell me."

"About whether I care?"

She waited.

"Well, I do care," he said. "Of course I do. But being a Driver or a Ped doesn't really matter. That's only part of it."

"Of what?"

"Of being one of us. One of His Majesty's Opposition."

"I th-thought the Driving was the important thing . . ."

"No," he said soothingly. Still stroking. "It's what they used to call a *casus belli*, that's all. It annoys the Peds. It's very good for them to be annoyed actually. It helps keep them well."

"I don't . . . understand."

"Well," he said, "it's like this. When you live in an over-crowded little place like England, and the people keep getting more, and more, and more and more and more till they're standing on each other's heads for room and still more coming, there's two things you can do. You can become a part of the Great Universal Zero, and think everything that everybody else thinks, and do everything that everybody else does; or you can fight it all. Like we do. Do all the things the Peds just hate. Be an anti-Benthamite,

a maggot in the big juicy apple of Bureaucracy." He twirled a strand of her hair round his finger. "We're all little non-conformists in our own special ways," he said. "Tinker writes poetry for instance, when he gets a spare few minutes. Some of it's very good too, though you'd never believe it to hear him boast. And Johnny sculpts and paints, Richard makes pottery, Sue breeds dragonflies . . ."

"What?"

"Dragonflies. They're extinct now, like Bentleys. Except for the ones she keeps. Each year, when they've laid their eggs, she lets them fly away over all the factory roofs. They always die of course."

"I'm scared again now," she said unhappily. "Somehow it's so terrible, knowing you can't ever win. That nobody cares. Father used to say, in the old days a lot of the Drivers weren't any better than the Peds. They didn't care either. It was only one or two like you. You can't beat the Peds, not now. Nothing will ever beat them again."

"Oh I don't know," he said reflectively. "One day England will sink back under the sea. That'll puzzle 'em a bit."

"Peter . . ."

"You've got altogether the wrong idea," he said gently. "Winning's a bore. None of us really want to *win*. All the fun's in the fighting."

"Peter," she said, "there's something I want to tell you."

"Not now."

"It won't wait."

He pushed her away to arm's length, held her shoulders and looked into her eyes. "You shouldn't try to hide the scar," he said. "You're very pretty, and it really doesn't matter." He paused. "Anything can wait," he said. "I mean that. *Anything*."

She watched back miserably; then from along the corridor came a moaning wail. It rose rapidly in pitch and volume, becoming a howling, an eldritch shriek. It was succeeded by the imperious banging of a gong. She gripped her throat, eyes wide with shock; and Hanssen laughed. "No," he said, "it isn't the Wardens. Or the Flight of the Valkyrie." His voice sank conspiratorially. "It's *my autovalet*."

"What?"

"Autovalet. It's a splendid machine. Tinker made it."

"But what does it *do*?"

"Well," he said, "it's like this. It gets up very early, and switches the rest of itself on, and makes a pot of tea. It's very clever, it has all sorts of little arms and things for measuring. Then it wakes me up . . ."

She began to giggle. "With *that*?"

"It can get much crosser than that. It gets louder if I don't go to it."

The sound rose again, sank at last to a mechanical muttering. "It's in a real temper now," said Hanssen. "Stamping all its little tin feet and swearing to itself. It'll go into the sulks soon; then it'll switch itself off until tomorrow."

"Peter," she said solemnly, "you're mad . . ."

He looked modest. "It runs in the family," he said. "I really can't claim any credit . . ."

She twined her arms round him again. "Don't go," she said. "Not for a long, long time. Promise?"

He frowned at her thoughtfully, suddenly far away.

"I'll tell you what," she said, nuzzling him. "If you promise, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll make your tea myself, later on . . ."

"It was marvellous," said Tinker cheerfully. "Really terribly funny. When I tore by they all jumped in the air like Keystone Cops . . . Hanssen?"

No answer.

"*Hanssen!*"

He threw open the door, and stopped in his tracks. "Oh, I say," he said. "Oh, you randy old bastard. Oh, well done . . ."

A trilby hat, one size too small and perched centrally on Peter Hanssen's broad skull, gave to his silhouette the decent semblance of a Roaduser; spectacles, plain-glassed and owlishly framed, completed the transformation. Moira, sitting beside him on the front seat of the SafeTiPed, wore a drab frock several inches too long to be fashionable;

behind her Suc was similarly veiled, and Tink had forsaken his traditional boater for a vast cap of black and white checks.

The car turned into the forecourt of a large showroom. Through the plate glass windows its identical brothers glowed pinkly, prim in their neatly spaced lines. "The finest place to hide a pebble," said Hanssen cheerfully, "is undoubtedly on the beach . . ." He glanced sidelong at Moira. "You know," he said, "I didn't go for it at first; but now I'm nearly certain I prefer you blonde." She smiled nervously, touching her forehead. The scar had almost vanished now; prosthetic make-up took care of what traces remained.

The SafeTiPed crossed the forecourt, nosed into a covered driveway and floundered to a halt in a plain, fluorescent parking area. The hooter bleated thrice; typically, a portion of wall slid to one side. Hanssen drove through, parked and climbed out of the vehicle. "Well," he said, "feel a thrill, m'dear? You're standing on the Central Museum."

Moira sniffed. "First you said it was under Buckingham Palace, then that you got to it through the Albert Memorial. I'm just not going to believe you any more . . ."

Hanssen grinned. "As you like . . ." He skimmed the trilby gratefully into a corner, took her arm and guided her through a door. The others followed, closing it carefully behind them. Moira shivered slightly; the air struck cool and damp. A short passageway led to a flight of steps. "Old winecellars," said Hanssen, ducking under a round brick arch. "Very deep . . ."

A white-painted wall section lifted grumbly to reveal yet more stairs. "Steady," said Hanssen. "Some of the treads are a bit dodgy . . ." Moira felt her heart begin to pound. She climbed down cautiously into blackness. A torch flashed; hands gripped her elbows. She pulled back momentarily. "It's all right," said Hanssen. "Come on . . ."

The sloping tunnel beyond was like nothing she had ever seen. Completely circular, constructed of joined rings of concrete, its queer acoustics caught the echoes of their footsteps and echoes of the echoes, flinging them forward

and back ; strange winds owl-called through unseen vents. dry and vagrant breezes brushed her face. "Peter," she whispered. "Where are we . . . ?"

Hanssen laughed. "In the days of the Grand *Débâcle*," he said, "some Transport Minister or other, I forget which, dreamed up the idea of tube railways. Must have had interests in cement and tunnelling gear. They didn't get very far with them of course and the plans of the bits they did build have been most artistically lost." He chuckled again. "Amazing what can be done," he said, "with a well-found tube railway."

Moira spoke very quietly. "How far does this one run?"

"About thirty miles. It's got dozens of entries and exits. It isn't one of the biggest of course, there are plenty longer."

"I see. No wonder the Wardens can't ever catch you."

"No wonder," he said non-committally.

The tunnel ended. They crossed a hall dimly lit by pilot bulbs. Moira saw festoons of old cable, torn warning notices about smoking and being Aware of the Ramp. Sue and Tinker followed close behind ; the echoes of their footsteps ran shrill across the curving roof.

Another door, at which a password was exchanged ; Moira was ushered through and found herself once more in near darkness. Hanssen's fingers touched her wrist ; she followed him timidly, setting her feet down with care. Again she seemed to be moving down a slope ; the breezes blew stronger and cool, from round about came susurations and whisperings, snatches of laughter and half-heard speech. Lights gleamed, vague and illusory, floating from distance to vanish again in the dark. Once a strange figure glided past. It wore the racing whites of an old-time driver ; over its shoulders was draped a scapular chequered in white and black, and as it turned its helmeted head she saw it wore the startlingly lifelike mask of a skull. She caught her breath and the darkness was back, clinging and absolute. From it came booms and chuggings, the rising snarl of high-powered engines. She was startled again until she realized she was hearing a recording.

The atmosphere of mystery was well maintained. When Hanssen finally stopped she felt disoriented and bemused. A heavy grinding, as of a steel shutter swinging back

before her face ; she was urged forward gently, stopped to hear the metal clang back behind her. She made to speak, felt Hanssen press two fingers lightly against her mouth. Darkness and silence were absolute ; it seemed she could hear the thumping of her heart.

Somewhere ahead of her a light began to glow, colourless and swimming. With it came a noise, half musical, a single chord pitched on the low threshhold of audibility. Her hand went automatically to her throat, subsonics triggering panic-responses. The note throbbed, faded with the strengthening of the light ; and she gasped, a short hissing sound of sheer surprise.

She stood in a great square hall ; and before her, dark grey against the brighter greyness of light, were the Cars. Brooding hulks they were at first before the light, still richening, gave splendour to their paintwork, gleamed from leather and glass, struck spindle-shaped reflections from headlamps and bonnets and wings, from radiators of brass and radiators of steel. They were all there, Fraser-Nash and Rolls, AC and Jaguar and Delage, Bugatti and Lagonda, Maserati and MG ; but she had eyes for only one. It stood in front of her, raised on a plinth so its initialled bonnet was higher than her head ; a mighty Speed Six, gleaming and perfect, complete to the last detail.

She walked forward helplessly. The thing that had loomed from so many pictures, studied and pored over till her head had spun ; the great ghost, here in its complete steel, so big, so much vaster than she had dreamed. Aloud she whispered, "*I wasn't worth it . . .*"

Hanssen had moved in front of her. He stood with his head lowered, hands gripping reverently the cockpit side of the Bentley. She walked to him silently, stooped fiddling with her dress, showing leg. Straightened, and pressed the nose of the little automatic against his neck just behind the ear. "I'm sorry," she said, small-voiced. "Please don't try to move . . ."

He stayed still, eyes watching ahead, feeling the trembling of her arm transmitted to the gun. Tinker and Sue had stopped, frozen, halfway to the door. Hanssen inclined his head slowly. "Very good," he said. "Nicely timed. I must compliment you, *Warden Kelly . . .*"

She jerked as though slapped. Then, "How long have you known?" The voice was flat, expressionless.

He flexed his fingers slowly on the door of the car. "All the time," he said.

She glanced sharply to her right. "No closer, Tink," she said. "Or I shall kill him. Get down, both of you. Flat on the floor."

They obeyed silently.

"How did you know?" she asked. "No, don't turn round."

"It was quite simple," said Hanssen quietly. "The drug scene wasn't faked, you used your proper name. I knew we were supposed to pick you up, it was to be made easy for us. Only Masterwarden Bigge and his little gang weren't in on the deal, they nearly spoiled it for everybody." He paused fractionally. "He isn't dead by the way," he said. "He's in hospital, we only found out this morning." He moistened his lips. "Well, Moira. What are you going to do?"

"It's done," she said. Her voice was brittle as glass. "You're all in the can, every one of you. By now the rest will have been taken away. Any moment they'll break through the door."

He moved his head slightly from side to side. "I don't think so."

"I'm sorry," she said. "But I'm a walking radio beacon, they've been tailing me ever since you took me away. Every garage you've used, every house you've been to. It's finished, Peter. You're through."

Flatly. "Radio beacon?"

"Yes. I'm bugged, Peter. I wanted to tell you once. I nearly did, but you wouldn't listen. Now it's too late."

He smiled. "If you mean that mess of shoulderstrap circuitry we picked apart the night you joined us," he said, "I'm afraid you'll have to think again, m'dear. You see we're not quite as clueless as we look . . ."

He heard the little intake of breath; the gun wavered then pressed again firmly. "I'm afraid," he said, "it's all up to you." He swallowed. "I'm sorry it wasn't for real," he said. "But while it lasted, it was very nice . . ."

A tear started suddenly, trickled to her lip. "No soft talk,

Peter," she said. "All that's done." She brushed at her face with the back of her free hand. "When I tell you, step down. Walk very slowly to the door."

He shook his head again. "It's no good," he said. "You're going to have to kill us, Moira. Because if you don't one or other of us will jump you." He waited a moment. "There's a pit over there," he said. "Best shoot us on that. The boards will stop the ricochets."

"You're . . . mad," she said unsteadily. "You want to die. All of you . . ."

"No. We want very much to live."

"Why, Peter," she said bitterly. "Why did you do it? Why did it have to be me . . .?"

"There's another little story," he said gently. "Moira, you know what it's like to be afraid. You nearly died once yourself, for the State, you're a very brave little girl . . . Well, there was a driver once years ago who vomited on the track every time he got into his car. Because he was so afraid. *But he always got in.*" His hands clenched on the cockpit edge. "This is the real Inner Mystery," he said. "The thing the Peds will never understand. Because they shut it away in the dark, and won't look at it. That way they think they're safe from it. We're all afraid, every one of us, nearly all the time. That's what we pit ourselves against, over and over. We have to test ourselves against our own fear. That's what fear is for."

He waited. The silence was intense.

"Ideas have to be tested too," he said. "Because if we're wrong, if the Peds really have inherited the earth and things are as they should be, then it's time we were dead anyway. We're anachronisms, wailing little ghosts that aren't important any more. That's why we let you go on. We showed you how we lived, what we were trying to do. We believed you had a brain that could think and choose. We were testing ourselves. *Against you . . .*"

She seemed to be panting. "Shut up," she said. "Just move . . ." The gun jabbed at his neck.

He ignored her. "More than us will die," he said, "when you pull that trigger. Look at the cars, Moira. Look at them. Can't you see a Shape? A Shape that runs somehow through every one, something that repeats and repeats all

the way down the years? It's the Shape of Speed, and Blood, and Fear, and Loneliness. The Shape of the Spirit of Man. Look at them, Moira. Don't you think, a little of somebody's soul went into making each one? Just a tiny bit? Can you really say, they're just old pieces of rubber, and glass, and iron? That they don't matter at all? These are all that are left, Moira, all in the whole wide world. Just these few, just one of each. All the rest are broken, and rotted, and burned." He lowered his voice. "It will be *Gotterdämmerung*, little girl," he said. "The end of an epoch. The true Twilight of the Gods . . ."

A long, long wait; then, quickly, the pressure was released from his neck. He stayed still, not breathing, and heard the tiny click as the gun was set on the floor. Moira sat down quietly, head back against the rear tyre of the Bentley, and began to cry. The tears fell silently, unwiped, wetting her chin.

Sue crossed to her quickly, squatted beside her and put an arm round her. "She'll be all right," she said. "Just leave us alone a little while. She'll be all right . . ."

Hanssen moved at last; stepped from beside the plinth, turned to feast his eyes on the great green car. He dropped his hand on Tinker's shoulder, smiling slightly, steering Tink ahead of him as he walked. Their footsteps receded, overlapping and confused, till in time the last faint echo died completely away.

— ALISTAIR BEVAN

THE RUN

by Chris Priest

As he left the Base, Senator Robbins heard the alarm begin its screaming warning. For most of the morning he'd toured the Base, getting facts. With the Pan-Asians agitating and an election due, he couldn't afford not to substantiate his anti-pacifistic claims with anything less than a well-publicised tour.

Behind his car, he could see the vid-crews piling their equipment back into their transports. He drove at a leisurely pace towards the main gate, and its attendant barrage of security checks. These days, driving was the only way he could get any relaxation; he scorned the idea of a chauffeur.

The security was suspiciously officious. He'd half-expected them to let him through with the most cursory of examinations, but they insisted on a complete check-over of all his identifications. Perhaps these fact-finding tours stirred up the military, after all.

As he left the security-lodge and approached the main gates, the last of the rockets fired. That was something he'd meant to investigate today: the constant total-readiness practices cost more than they were perhaps worth. He made a mental note to get his secretary to prepare a report. The rocket was the usual manned sort, a sliver of dusty metal, scarcely visible in the overcast. It disappeared quickly, its after-glow illuminating a small patch of the clouds. Through the thick plastic of his car's body, Robbins could feel the sonic throb of the rocket's huge motors.

He turned out of the Base, onto the grey slip-road that led to the major freeway. As his car accelerated silently along the aluminium strip, another flight of rockets, presumably from some other nearby base, swept overhead. They were flying low these days, this new defence-pattern he'd been told about. A wash of noise seemed to make his

car totter on its plates ; he closed the windows and turned the air-conditioner up full.

He came eventually to the freeway, and followed the filter-strip onto its width. It looked like a photograph Robbins had seen once, of one of the old railway marshalling-yards. Tracks crossed and re-crossed, merged and divided. He filtered until he was in the med-fast lane, and pushed the speed up to the maximum allowed. Several cars swished by in the fast lanes, later models than his own car, equipped with the latest in repulse braking-aids. Where was it all going to end? Robbins asked himself. Speeds seemed to rise every year with the new models. He dwelt momentarily on the notion of re-introducing some of the old traffic legislation, but dismissed it. Accidents were rare these days, but bad when they happened. The safety factors built into the vehicles were dependable, and the number of people allowed to possess cars was reducing every year.

He leaned forward against the gentle restraint of his safety-webbing and raised his secretary on the call-kit.

"Andersen? Robbins here."

His secretary's voice came through, sounding strained. "Boss. Get back here as quick as you can. Big trouble."

"What is it? Can you tell me over the line?"

"Code E, boss. Code E."

The kit went dead, his secretary had switched off. He made to recall him, then stopped. Andersen never acted like that unless something was seriously wrong. Code E was the clue, of course. He'd worked out a private series with Andersen when the trouble with the Pan-Asians had first blown up. Code E was national-scale. That was all.

He drove on, his mind working hard. Overhead, another low flight of the silver rockets added weight to his forebodings.

Five kilometres up the freeway, Robbins took another filter-strip, and followed it as it wound into a minor sidetrack. His speed dropped away, compensating for the sharper bends he'd encounter.

He caught a glimpse of the Sessions Hall, a bleak modern building, soaring into the sky over the surrounding forest.

Seeing it from such a great distance it reminded Robbins, as it always did when he came along this route, of a large marker. Decentralising a government seemed wasted when it was housed in a building as prominent as that. Or perhaps there was something more subtle about it, something he hadn't realised.

The track began to climb a little, and the trees became thicker along its side. Very soon, he came to the junction; a single-track dipping down through the trees, losing itself between wooded banks. He approached the turning carefully, waiting for the signal to flash green. The pole-barrier raised itself automatically, and his car slipped through. He switched off the identifying beam, and behind him the pole dropped back into place.

He accelerated quickly, impatient to get back to his office. Andersen's cryptic message meant war at worst, crisis at best. Either way he needed to be at hand. The government's foreign policy, in Robbins' opinion, was too flaccid. It listened to public opinion too much, and varied with the currency of popular ideals. The pacifists had had their way now for seven years, allowing the Pan-Asians to infiltrate every civilised country they bordered on. The time had come to show a little strength, pull a few triggers, push a few buttons. They'd give way soon enough, shown a few strong-arm tactics.

Robbins found he'd unconsciously pushed his speed too far, and he let it drop away a little. This was low-speed strip, not stressed for fast cornering. Ahead of him, the aluminium track wound over the undulating countryside. About two kilometres ahead it disappeared around the sharp turn at Packer's Mill.

A movement caught his eye. He'd seen a human figure for a brief moment, disappearing behind one of the many trees. He looked again at the spot, then saw the youth. He was a thin fellow, dressed in a drab grey coverall, long hair flopping over his face. Behind him, standing amongst the trees, the Senator could see many others, dressed almost identically.

What were they doing in the forest? It was supposed to be patrolled from the air, warning off any strays. They were probably part of a gang of Juvies—Robbins had

heard that several had been seen in the vicinity lately. He looked on the other side of the track, and noted with a sudden unaccountable twinge that there were many on that side too. Instinctively he slowed the car a little, hesitating.

As he did so, several of the Juvies levered themselves away from the trees they were leaning against, and walked steadily towards the track. Robbins drove on cautiously. He began to see more and more youths, some of them clustering in bunches near the track. As he passed one of these bunches, a Juvie spat deliberately at the car, his spittle splaying across the windscreen. The first trace of real alarm nudged at Robbins' mind, and he looked into his rear-view screen. The track behind him was full, Juvies walking easily along it behind him. Some of the youths were running, as if trying to pace the car. He increased his speed again, a little nervously. The car surged forward, its blunt nose thrusting as the lineal plates increased their field, hugging the aluminium strip.

On either side of the track, the numbers grew. Most of the Juvies just watched, but some of them—the younger ones, Robbins guessed—were shouting insults and waving sticks. The track before him streamed away in a grey curve of dull ribbon, disappearing around Packer's. At the bend, Robbins could see a crowd of the youths looking towards his car expectantly. There must be a hundred in that part alone, he guessed. The little knot of alarm had grown inside him, swollen by an unreasoned certainty that they had been waiting for him.

He found he was still accelerating, and glanced at his speed-meter. It showed 120 kph, and rising. Another quick look at the screen showed him more Juvies climbing down behind him. He looked around; everywhere, it seemed, he could see the drably-dressed youths flowing onto the track.

His car screamed silently towards the bend at Packer's. Standing out like a promontory, the tree-lined bank convexed down to the edge of the track, bearing its cargo of young humanity, jeering and cheering as the Senator ploughed down towards them. He was going too fast for the bend, he'd have to slow. He jabbed at his reverse-flow, and the speed dropped away a little. The cheering rose as

his momentum died, and the Juvies pressed nearer to the track. He went into the corner too fast. He grappled with the emergency braking, fighting against the violent shuddering that tore through the cabin ; bucking and pitching, the plates ground against the strip, threatening to leave their guides. As he came out of the bend something metallic and heavy crashed against the roof of the cabin, and a roar of approval came from the perilously-balanced crowd of Juvies. In his screen he saw a great iron girder roll against the aluminium strip.

And then he was round the corner. His car righted itself immediately, its gyro holding it level again. Ahead the track was empty, straight and true it ran for a full kilometre, slipping gently down the long incline. Dead ahead, he could see the tall shape of the Sessions Hall standing like a beacon on the horizon. A strange flash caught his eye, then another. Twin streaks of flame shot upwards from near the base of the Hall, and lost themselves in the cloud. Two more followed them, and Robbins realised what they were. The anti-missile site, unmanned and fully automatic, was being brought against something. It very much looked as if the Senator's worst fears were justified.

Immediately, it was all the more imperative that he get back to the Hall as fast as he could. He looked into his rear-view screen. Behind him, the bend was crowded with Juvies. They were making no attempt to follow him, evidently preferring to watch his progress. He checked his speed, and saw that he had almost halted. What had happened there? Had they been trying to kill him on the corner? It seemed unlikely ; from what little he knew of Juvie habits, the Senator was certain that whatever they did they made sure would work. And with the biggest gang he'd ever seen or heard of, he would expect something a little more positive than terror-tactics. He sweated at the thought. If that was so, then they hadn't finished with him yet.

He craned forward against the restraining pull of his safety-webbing. At the end of the slope, he caught a movement. Even as he watched, hundreds of Juvies wormed out of the trees, pushing and jostling they fought for position along the edge of the track. There was nothing

orderly about their movement, it was as if they'd been released from a stockade all at once. They fought and shoved, several of them stumbling onto the track, and over the aluminium strip. With horror, Robbins saw that those that fell stayed there, making no effort to move. Many more were throwing themselves against the strip, deliberately placing their bodies in his path.

Torn with indecision, he looked desperately around. What were they doing? Did they want to kill themselves?

An idea struck him, and he reached across for the call-kit. As he waited for a reply, he saw that the Juvics by the corner were walking down towards him. The leaders, five rangy youths in ill-fitting overalls, were near the car and he could see now that they were carrying weapons. He turned back to the call-kit, and held his finger down on the button. No reply. What the hell was going on? Then he remembered the girder that had hit the roof; it must have damaged the aerial.

There was a crash, and his rear window starred into opacity. His screen showed some of the youths throwing stones: he'd have to move soon. Reluctantly, he started the car moving again—down the slope towards the others. A great cheer rose as he began to move, a taunting ovation of derision and scorn. It died away to be replaced by a chant. An insidious and growing beat; a pounding, droning, throbbing drum of voices—frightening and stimulating.

The mocking hymn grew and grew, and suddenly he caught the words. At last he knew what the whole thing was about. Now he understood all that had just happened. The chant was one word, one whose semantic roots lay far into the past, whose meaning had grown and swollen with the years, and one that now meant a semi-religious cult of suicidal magnitude. And all around Senator Robbins, the whole world shouted the word.

Chicken.

Chicken, they screamed. Chicken. *Chicken*. CHICKEN. *CHICKEN*.

And this—this was a Run.

The full implication struck Robbins as his car reached the 50 kph mark. He had unwittingly let himself in for a Run, something that only happened to other people. He

allowed his speed to build up a little more. His mind worked frantically. What was he going to do? Rather, what could he do? There seemed little choice ; behind him was a hard knot of Juvies, running now, he could see. Ahead of him, the pressing mob had overflowed right onto the track, the aluminium strip flying into their bodies like a grey arrow. All along the track, the Juvies stared at his car, watching defiantly as he accelerated towards them.

Robbins' fear suddenly evaporated, to be replaced by a strident wave of anger. These damned Juvies couldn't push him around! Besotted with drugs, drunk with unwonted power, these unemployed and unemployable delinquents thought they ruled the Earth. Thought! That was ironic, Robbins reflected as he encouraged more and more speed out of his car, they practically did rule some parts of the country. He shuddered as he thought of a world ruled by ageing louts, the ignorant and cowardly, the weakminded and strong-bodied. Every year's new unemployment figures added millions to their ranks.

Another flash on the horizon worried the corner of his vision. Somewhere, in another world it seemed, a war had started. But even that was somehow subordinated by this personal battle of his. He glanced at his speed-meter and saw that he still had plenty of speed in hand. He wasn't far from the nearest Juvies, and began to imagine that he could see their faces. In fact, all he could see was a blur of white and brown, an untidy heap of humanity, testing their bravery against his. He held his speed at a steady 100, and braced himself. Nearer, ever nearer. All around him the chanting screamed and throbbed, urging and pushing him to hold his speed.

What was he doing, what was there to prove? He wasn't a coward, he knew that. Why did he have to test himself in front of these morons? There was no bravery in throwing a ton of plastic and steel at a mountain of human bodies, mangling and maiming ; killing to prove himself. He wasn't a Juvie, he wasn't ruled by any mob. He was a civilised person in a civilised community ; a respected person in a position of trust. He was a Senator, and had the faith of twenty thousand voters behind him, trusting his dignity and discretion. And, most important, he was human.

It was abhorrent to his very nature to kill for its own sake, to plough through a hundred bodies, destroying life and making it a pleasure.

He was a hundred metres from the mound of Juvies. The chanting throbbed into his consciousness, exciting and stimulating him; beating like the jungle drums of primitive peoples. It seemed to get faster and faster in crescendo of hate, mounting and spiralling as he sped ever closer. He could see their faces now, pink and white and grey—all of them staring fixedly at his car, waiting for him to break. He could see their mouths opening and closing. *Chicken—pause—chicken—pause—chicken—pause—chicken—pause—chicken . . .*

They'd never break, there were too many of them. They'd sit there until he killed them all. They'd sit there watching him, watching as he rammed them.

He made his decision: grabbed the emergency brake, and applied full reverse thrust. He slammed forward into the webbing of straps, seeming to hang there as the great plates fought against the momentum. No scream of brakes, no squeal of rubber. A silent, steady, remorseless pull of power acting like a barrier of unyielding cotton-wool. He felt as if he hung there for an eternity, eyes blinded by a sudden fireball, his reactions nil.

And then he was free. He slumped into his seat as the car stopped, a bare metre or so from the nearest Juvie. He lolled forward, sliding down inside the straps, eyes still blind from the sun-white glare.

Outside, a hot wind blew, and a great hand lifted his car.

There was a terrible silence, when he came round. The first thing he saw was his watch, still ticking and apparently undamaged. He'd been unconscious only a few minutes. There was something wrong with his vision, it was as if he were seeing everything through a maze of retinal shadows.

He moved his limbs experimentally. There was a pain in his side, but nothing else seemed to be damaged. Automatically, he reached for the webbing-release, and freed himself. The car, with most of its windows smashed, was lying on its side a long way from the track. He climbed up

through what had been the windscreen, treading cautiously on the broken remains of the controls.

Outside, there was inferno. The Sessions Hall had vanished, replaced instead by a great trunk of cloud. On all sides, the trees had been flattened and stripped of their leaves. Many were burning, their smoke adding to the desolate cloud of nuclear release. And all around, the bodies of the Juvies lay. All had been burnt, all were now dead.

Robbins stood there for a long long time. Presently, he began to cough, and blood trickled through his lips. He turned his back on what had once been the Hall, and walked erratically up the way he had come so recently. That had been an age ago ; a new age had started.

Overhead, a low flight of yellow rockets skimmed away from the black cloud.

— CHRISTOPHER M. PRIEST

CRY MARTIAN

by Peter L. Cave

Timmy ran up the garden path, bursting with a child's childish exuberance. Cries of "Mummymummymummy" started at the front gate and continued into the kitchen.

"What is it dear," she enquired, with a mother's motherly patience, her voice unconsciously forming itself into a tone of utter indifference—the tone invariably used with eight-year-olds.

"I went out playing in the woods today," announced Timmy, in a matter-of-fact sort of way.

"Did you dear?" said mother, returning to her labours.

Timmy continued with his narrative, not noticing the fact that his mother was no longer with him. How could he know that her first, quick spasm of interest had died as suddenly as it had been born. She knew that Timmy had not cut himself, had not fallen from a tree, had not set fire to the house. Everything was as it should be. The world was at rights. Routine went on.

"I went into the dark part," said Timmy proudly.

His mother swished the end of the tap spout round the sink.

"I went farther into that part of the wood than anyone has ever been. Even David Getts, 'cause I passed the tree where he carved his name on the trunk—and HE says that's the farthest anyone has ever been."

"Oh yes dear."

"I'm going to be chief explorer at school when I tell them what I found. Guess what I found, Mummy?"

"I don't know dear—what did you find?" said his mother, realising that she was expected to say something, show some interest.

"I found a Martian camp," the child announced firmly and very smugly.

"Well I never. Fancy that Timmy."

Timmy fell silent for a moment.

"Mummy."

"Yes dear?"

"Mummy, are Martians like funny little men, all stooped over, and sort of greeny-coloured?"

"I expect so dear."

"Well then—they WERE Martians," Timmy finished emphatically.

There was another short silence interrupted only by the sound of vegetables plopping into the pan.

"Why do you think they chased me? I mean, I wasn't doing anything wrong, only looking at them. They looked ever so angry."

"I've no idea Timmy."

"You know Mummy—if I was a Martian . . ."

"Were Timmy. If I WERE a Martian," corrected his mother.

"Well then, if I were a Martian, I bet I wouldn't chase people. I'd be a good Martian. Anyway, they can't run very fast on their stumpy little legs."

"Would you dear?" The conversation seemed to have reached its logical conclusion. Timmy turned and ran into his playroom, rummaged about for a few minutes and emerged wearing a plastic holster and two atomic blaster pistols.

"Timmy, where are you going?" asked his mother as he walked out of the kitchen door.

"I'm going down to call for Johnnie, and then we're going hunting Martians," replied Timmy from halfway down the garden path.

"Well don't be too long dear. Dinner will be ready in about an hour."

The gate slammed noisily behind him.

Mother finished the last of the vegetables, set the saucepan on the cooker, dried her hands absently on her apron and stood for a moment leaning against the sink. There was the faintest look of worry on her face. She untied her apron strings, threw it across the tabletop, and strolled into the garden.

She walked round the side of the bungalow to the front garden, where her husband was working with a husband's husbandly zeal.

Continued on page 46

HOME CALLING

by Judith Merril

The second of two parts.

When the Mother-bug laughed, it tickled in her mind ; when the Mother was angry it prickled. When the Mother called to her, it was a feeling that came creeping ; when she didn't want to hear, it came seeping anyhow.

Trickle-prickle ; creep-seep. I spy. I speard you. It was like seeing and hearing both, if you let it be, or just like knowing what you didn't know a minute before. It could be without the seeing part, as when she thought she heard Petey's voice ; or it could be without hearing, just a picture full of meaning, without any words. You didn't *really* see or hear ; you really just *found out*.

And if you let yourself know the difference, you could tell what was coming from the Mother-bug . . . such as thinking she was cold for a minute a little while ago. You could tell, all right, if you wanted to . . .

It was a lot smarter to make sure you knew the differences to watch for when the Mother-bug was putting something in your head, so you wouldn't get mixed up and start thinking you wanted something yourself, when it was really what *she* wanted. Or like thinking Petey wanted her to open the door in the rocket, where it was really the Mother-bug . . .

No it wasn't either . . . Petey *did* want her too, because he heard the Mother-bug calling them from outside, before Dee heard it . . . or he understood better what it was, or . . . *she's telling me all this; I'm not thinking it for myself!* Up to that part about Petey being the one who wanted her to open the door, she *had* been thinking for herself; after that, it was the bug. It was getting easier, now, to tell the difference.

"How do you know Earthish?" she asked out loud, but there wasn't any kind of answer except the question-y feeling again. "I mean the language we use. I mean how do you know the words to put in my head . . . ?" She stopped talking because her head was hurting; then she realized the Mother-bug was trying to explain, only it was too complicated for her to understand. Part of it was that the bugs *didn't* know Earthish, though. She understood that much well enough, and lost the hope she'd had for just an instant that other *people* were here already. She didn't try to understand the rest. "How do you make Petey put things in my head?" she asked instead.

It felt as if the Mother was smiling. She didn't *make Petey say things* at all. He was always saying things, only mostly Dee didn't know how to listen—except, somehow, when the Mother-bug was around, it was easier . . .

Her head was starting to hurt again, so she stopped asking questions about that. "Listen," she said; "I still have to go back to the rocket."

She didn't know whether she wanted to come back here or stay there. No—that was true, all right, that she didn't know; but right now it was the Mother-bug *asking* her what she wanted to do.

"I don't know," she said, not trying to pretend anything, because the Mother-bug would have spy-heard that part already. "Only I have to get back there anyhow; so I'll wait till I get there to decide."

She'd leave Petey behind, and return at least for a visit?

"No!" she said. That was one thing at least she was sure about. Even if she was sure she was coming back, she couldn't leave Petey all alone here with these bugs. Mommy would . . . *anybody* would get mad at a kid for doing a thing like that!

"No!" she said again. "I've got to go, and Petey has to go with me; that's all there is to it." She thought she sounded very firm and grown-up, until she felt the Mother smiling again in the way that made her remember her . . . somebody she used to know.

XVIII

The more she learned, the less she seemed to know. The Strange child, though still inexplicably frightened, was at last being communicative and co-operative. Yet each new piece of information acquired during the morning's interview had only served to make the puzzle of the Strangers more complex or more abstruse.

How and why they had come here . . . even *whence* they had come . . . their habits, customs, biology, psychology . . . the nature of the *ship* in which they lived, and flew . . . the very fact of the existence of the older child's continuing fear and doubt . . . and Strangest of all, perhaps, the by-now irrefutable fact that *neither of the children knew whether their Mother was alive, inside the Ship, or had departed . . .*

None of these matters were any easier to comprehend now than they had been the day before; and most of them were more confusing.

However, there was now at least some hope of solving some parts of the puzzle . . . two parts, in any case. The Strange daughter had agreed, after only slight hesitation, to allow a flying son to come inside the *ship* with her, and to explain to the Mother, watching through her son's eyes, as much of what was to be found there as she could. The child apparently had felt that by permitting the exploratory visit, she was securing the right of the babe to accompany her on the trip . . . a right she would in any case have had for the asking. And there was some further thought in the girl's mind of perhaps not returning . . . but Daydanda was not seriously concerned about it. She had refrained carefully from proferring any insistent hospitality, since the daughter's fear of remaining alone with her sibling seemed even greater than that of remain-

ing with the Household, provided only she did not feel herself to be a *captive* in the House.

It still remained to be seen, of course, whether it would be possible to provide for the two Strangers within the biological economy of the Families. That, however, was the other part of the puzzle that was already on the road to a solution. The daughter had most fortuitously, before leaving the Lady's chamber, expressed an urgent need to perform some biological functions for which, apparently, a waste receptacle of some sort was required. Daydanda had issued rapid orders to one of the more ingenious of the mason sons, to manufacture as best he could a receptacle conforming to the image she found in the child's mind. Then she had seized the opportunity to ask if she might have a nursing daughter take some samples of the *milk* and other food that had come with them from the *ship*, and of such other bodily by-products as she had already observed the Strangers to produce; the *tears* that came from the eyes in the release of grief, and the general bodily exudation for which the child's symbol was *sweat*, but whose purpose or function she seemed not to understand herself.

Once again, as she had had occasion to do many times before, the Lady regretted the maternal compulsiveness of her own nature that had stood in the way of producing a Scientist within the Household. As matters now stood, the samplings she had secured from the Strange children would have to be flown two full day's journey away, to the Encyclopedic Seat, for analysis. If she had been willing—just once in all these years—to inhibit the breeding of a full Family in order to devote the necessary nutrient and emotional concentration to the creation of a pair of Scientists, she would be able to have the answer to the present problem in hours instead of days, and without having to forgo the services of two of her best fliers for the duration of the trip there and back. Then, if it appeared necessary to utilize the more varied facilities of the Seat, she could submit her samples with the security of knowing that her own representative there would keep

watch over her interests ; and that everything learned about the Strange samples would be transmitted instantly and fully from the brother at the Seat to the twin in the Household. Daydanda knew only too well how often in the past the Seat had seen fit to retain information for its own use, when the products for analysis came from an unrepresented House . . .

No use in worrying now, either about what might be, or about what had not been done. *One* matter, at least, would be resolved before the day was done . . . the baffling question of what lay inside that double-arched opening in the wall of the Wings-House . . . and along with it, the answer, perhaps, to the puzzle of the Strange children's Mother.

XIX

This time they rode in the litter ; and the trip that had taken a long afternoon the day before was accomplished in a short hour of trotting, bouncing progress. Yesterday, the pace had been slowed as much by the litter-bearers' efforts to spare their Lady any unnecessary jostling, as by the shortness of Dee's leg ; today Daydanda's labouring sons were inhibited by no such considerations.

At the edge of the clearing they paused, their eyes averted from the shiny hull.

Dee laughed out loud, and ran out into the sunlight. It felt good. She knew she was showing off, but it made her feel better just to stand there and look straight *up*, because she knew there wasn't one of them that would dare to do it.

"Sissies!" she yelled out, there was no answer . . . not even a scolding-feeling from the Mother-bug.

She went back to the litter, got Petey out, and parked him on the muddy ground near the airlock, wondering if it was safe to leave him out there while she went inside. They wouldn't do anything like grabbing him and running off, she decided. The Mother-bug wanted to know about the rocket too much ; and the Mother-bug wanted *her* to come back, too—not just Petey.

Still, she didn't make any move to go inside. It was good standing there in the sun, even without the show-off part of it. She watched Petey grab big chunks of yellow mud and plaster himself with them, and felt the sun soak into her shoulders and warm the top of her head.

This place wouldn't be so bad, she thought, if it wasn't for the trees everyplace, cutting out the sun. Inside the forest, it was always a little bit drippy and damp, and the light was always dimmed. But when you got out into it, the sun here was a good one—better than on Starhope. It felt like the sun used to feel, she thought she remembered, when she was almost as little as Petey, before they went away from Earth.

She wished she could remember more about Earth. Mommy always told her stories about it, but Mom . . . *Don't think about that!*

She wished she could remember more about Earth. It was green there, Green like in the forests here, where the treetops lent their colour to everything? That wasn't what Mom . . . what the stories meant, she was sure. For just an instant, there was a picture in her mind; and because it came so suddenly, she suspected at first that the Mother-bug put it there, but it didn't *feel* that way. Then she wasn't sure whether it was something she remembered, from when she was very little, or whether it was truly a *picture*—one she'd seen at school, or on the T-Z. But she was sure that that was how Earth was supposed to look, wherever she was remembering it from.

The trees there were called Appletrees, for a kind of fruit they had, and they grew separated from each other on a hillside, with low branches where the children could climb right up to the tops of them like walking up steps. Then you'd sit in the top, and the breeze would come by, smelling sweet and fresh like Mom . . . the way lavender looked. And you would eat sweet fruit from the swaying branch, and . . .

She jumped as a hairy arm brushed her hand. It was the one with wings who was supposed to go with her into

the rocket. It . . . *he*, the Mother said it was her *son*, pointed to the air-lock, and Dee got the question-y feeling again. Then there were words to go with it.

"Go inside now?"

It was surprising at first that his "voice" "sounded" just like the Mother-bug's. Then she realized it *was* the Mother-bug, talking through his mind. Dee understood by now that the words she "heard" were supplied by herself to fit the picture or emotions the other person—*that was silly, calling a bug a person!*—"sent" to her; but she was pretty sure that the words or the sort-of-a-voice-sound she'd make up for one person—bug—would be different from the way she'd "hear" another one.

Anyway, the Mother wanted her to go inside. She decided against leaving Petey outdoors by himself, and picked him up and lifted him in before she climbed through the airlock. The bug with wings came right behind her.

The playroom was a mess. Living in there all the time, Dee hadn't realized how everything was thrown around; but now, when she had a visitor with her—even if he was just a bug—she felt kind of ashamed about the way it all looked. Maybe he wouldn't know the difference . . . but he would. She remembered how the inside of their big House was neat and clean all over; and not just the inside . . . even the woods were kept tidy all the time. She'd seen a bunch of bugs out picking up dead branches, and gathering leaves off the ground on the way over here.

This bug didn't seem to care though. He looked around at everything, with his head bent down backwards so he could see, and Dee got the idea he wanted to know if it was all right to touch things. She picked up a toy and some clothes, and put them into the hands on his front legs. After that, he went around looking and touching and handling things all over the playroom, while Dee hunted up some clothes to take back with them.

She couldn't find very much that was clean, so she took a whole pile of stuff from the floor, and went in back to put them into the soil remover. The bug followed her.

It—he—watched her put the clothes into the square box ; he jumped a little when she turned the switch on and it started shaking, as it always did, a little. Dee laughed. Then she went around turning on all the machines that she knew how to work, just to show the bug. She wished she knew how to use the power tool, because that made a whole lot of noise, and did all kinds of different things ; but Daddy never let . . . but she didn't know how to, that's all.

The bug just stood still in the middle of the room, looking and listening. He didn't even *want* to touch anything in here, Dee figured ; so she asked him out loud, didn't he want to feel what the machines were like? And then she found out she *could* tell the difference in one bug's voice and another's, because the Mother said a kind of eager, "Thank you—are you sure," the son-bug said at the same time, kind of nervous-sounding, "No, thank you ; these devices are very Strange . . ." and then he must have realized what his Mother wanted, because he said, "I am afraid I might damage them."

Dee felt the Mother's smiling then, and with the smile, a question : "Where do they breath? With what do they eat?"

"Who?" Dee said out loud.

"Those others . . . the *machines*, is your symbol for them." And at the same time, she saw inside her head a sort of twisty picture of the room all around her. She saw it with her own eyes, the way it really was ; and at the same time, she was seeing it the way the Mother-bug must be seeing it—which was the way her son was seeing it, and "sending" the picture to her. It wasn't *much* different, mostly just the colours weren't as bright. And somehow, all the machines, the way the Mother-bug saw them, were *alive*.

Dee laughed. Those bugs were pretty smart, but there were lots of things she knew that they didn't.

"They *don't* breathe," she said scornfully ; "they're just machines, that's all."

"?????"

"They're machines ; they do things for people. You turn

'em on and make them work, and then when you're done, you turn them off again. They run on electricity."

"?????"

She couldn't explain electricity very well. "It's like . . . lightning."

But the Mother didn't know what she meant by that either. "Don't talk," the big bug told her; "make a picture in your head. Stand near the machine-that-cleans, and make pictures, not words, in your own head, to show how it works for you."

Deborah tried, but she'd never seen what the machinery looked like inside the soil remover. There wasn't very much of it anyway. Da . . . somebody had explained it to her once. There was just a horn—or something like a horn—that kept blowing, without making any noise; at least not any noise that you could hear. The blowing shook all the dirt out of the clothes, and there was a u-v light inside to sterilize them at the same time. That was all she knew, and she didn't know what it really *looked* like, except for the u-v bulb; and she didn't even know what made *that* work, really.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'd make a picture for you if I could."

"Is there one of these creatures . . . machines . . . you have *seen* inside?"

She'd seen inside of the freeze unit when it was being fixed once. She tried to remember just how that looked; but it was complicated, and the Mother still didn't seem to understand.

"The little pipes?" she asked, and Dee wasn't sure whether she meant the freezing coils or the wires; but then she was sure it was the wires. "They bring food to the creature so it can work?"

"No I *told* you It's not a 'creature.' It doesn't even *ever* eat. The wires just have electricity in them, that's all. Don't you even know what an electric wire is?"

"Where do the pipes . . . wires . . . bring the *electric* from?"

Dee looked around. The generator was . . . it was in . . . "There's a generator someplace," she said carelessly.

"It makes electricity ; that's what it's for. I can show you how the T-Z works, because somebody I know showed me once." She went out to the playroom, and started talking, describing her favourite toy, and making pictures in her mind to show the Mother-bug how it worked, and what some of the stories looked like. She talked fast, and kept on talking till she had to stop for breath ; but then she realized she didn't have to talk out loud to the Mother, so she went on thinking about stories she'd seen on T-Z, and she decided she'd take it back with some of the film strips, so the Mother could see for herself how it worked.

Machine! An entity capable of absorbing energy in one form, transmuting it to some other form, and expending it in the performance of work . . . work requiring judgement, skill, training . . . and yet the Strange child said these things were not alive! Daydanda rested on her great couch, but felt no ease, and wished again that she had had the fortitude to go out with the small group. To *see for herself* . . .

But she could never even have gotten through the narrow double-arch entrance to the *ship*. The *ship* . . . that too, then, was a machine! It was a structure ; a builded thing ; *not-alive* ; yet it could fly . . .

These two Strangers were very different creatures from a very different race ; she began to understand that now. The striking similarities were purely superficial. The differences . . .

The thought of the babe tugged at her mind, asking warmth, asking food, and she could not think of him as Strange at all. There were differences ; there were samenesses. No need now to make a counting of how many of which kind. Only to learn as much as could be learned, while she determined whether it was possible or desirable to keep the two Strange ones within the Household.

Very well then : these *machines* are not alive . . . not all the time. They live only when the Strange daughter permits it, in most cases by moving a small organ projecting from the outside. Not so different, if you stopped to think of it, from the Bigheads, who might be counted not-alive most of the time. It was hard to adjust to the

notion of working members of a Household existing on that low level, but . . . these were Strangers.

And still the child maintained the *machines* were not alive at all, not members of her Household, merely structures, animated by . . .

By what? The things absorbed energy from somewhere. Through the little pipes . . . apparently almost pure energy, the stuff the child called *electric*. What was the source of the *electric*?

The Strange daughter had a symbol and not-clear picture in her mind: a thing with rotating brushes, and a hard core of some kind. A thing kept under a round shelter, made of the same fabric as the ship . . . *metal*. From under this *metal* housing came *wires* through which *electric* flowed to the *machines* . . . much as cement flowed from the snout of a mason, or honey from the orifice of a nurse.

Into this machine, food was . . . no, the child's symbol was a different one, though the content of the symbol was the same; food designed for a *machine* was *fuel*. Very well: *fuel* was fed only to the . . . the *Mother-machine*!

Now the whole thing was beginning to make sense. The *machines* were comparable—in relationship to the Stranger's Household—to the winged or crawling creatures that sometimes co-existed with the Household of Daydanda's own people, sharing a House in symbiotic economy, but having, of course, a distinct biology and therefore, a separate Mother and separate reproductive system.

The *generator*, said the child, supplied warmth and nourishment and vital power to the other *machines*; the *generator* was fed by the *humans* (the child's symbol for her own people); the *machines* worked for the *humans*.

"Is the generator of machines alive?" the Lady asked.

"No. I told you before . . ."

"Am I alive?"

"Yes. Of course."

The wonder was not that the Strange daughter failed to include the symbiotes in her semantic concept of "life," but rather that she *did* include Daydanda, and

Daydanda's Household. The Lady abandoned the effort to communicate such an abstraction, and ask if she might be shown the Mother-machine.

Wavering impression of willingness, but . . .

The thing was on the other side of a door. The daughter went through one doorway into the room she had first entered, approached the far wall, and turned sideways, to demonstrate in great detail a mechanism of some sort (not one of the *machines*; no wires connected it to the Mother-machine) whose function apparently was educational. It created visual, auditory, and olfactory hallucinations, utilizing information previously registered on strips of somehow-sensitized fabric inside it . . . roughly analogous to the work of a teaching-nurse, who could register and retain for instructive purposes information supplied by the Mother, and never fully available to the nurse in her own functioning, nor in any way necessary for her to "know." Thus an unwinged nurse could give instruction in the art of flying, and the biology of reproduction. But, once again, the Stranger's mechanism was—or so the child said—simply an artifact, a *made* thing, without life of its own, and this time it was even more puzzling than before, because the object in question was self-contained—had its own internal source of *electric*, and needed no connecting *wires* with the Mother-machine.

Mother-machine . . . *Mother!*

Daydanda reacted so sharply to the sudden connection of data that Kackot, asleep in the next chamber, woke and came rushing to her side. Smiling, she shared her thoughts with him.

Machine-Mother and Stranger-Mother both . . . behind a door! The *same* door?

"The source of *electric* is behind the other door?" The Mother-bug's question formed clearly in her mind this time. Dee looked up from the T-Z. There *wasn't* any other door. She looked all around but she couldn't see one. There was just the airlock, and the door to the work-room and kitchen in back, but the Mother didn't mean either of those.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, and went back to get the clothes out of the soil-remover, and thawed out a piece of cake from the freeze.

Daydanda looked at one and the same time through the eyes of her son in the Strange ship, and through those of the Stranger. Both focused on the same part of the same wall. Through the son's eyes, the Lady saw a rectangular outline in the surface of the wall, and a closure device set in one side. Through the child's eyes, she could see only a smooth unbroken stretch of wall.

"*There is no door,*" the child informed her clearly . . . then turned around and left the room, once more broadcasting meaningless symbols, and accurate, but inappropriate, arithmetic.

Dee made sure she had enough clothes for a while. She didn't want to come back here right away. Maybe later on. She'd have to come back later on, of course. She couldn't really *stay* with the bugs. But . . .

She took a long strip off the roll of bottles, and a lot of milk, and all the powdered stuff she could find that looked any good. They probably had water there, anyhow. Things out of the freeze would spoil if she took them, so she left them for later, when she came back to the rocket.

She had to make a couple of trips to get everything out to the litter: the clothes and food and the T-Z and Petey and some toys for Petey; and the Mother-bug or the son-bug, one of them, kept trying to say things at her, but she wouldn't listen. She just started saying the Space Girl oath again; and when she couldn't remember it, even some of the silly multiplication, because she didn't feel like talking right now.

XX

Daydanda was short of time, and entirely out of patience. The Strange child's antics had gone from the puzzling to the incomprehensible, and the Lady of the

House had other concerns . . . many of them now aggravated by inattention over the preceding days. She simply could not continue to devote nearly all her thought, nor nearly so much of her time, to any one matter.

The children had brought back with them provisions sufficient for a few days at least, and the Mother was satisfied that their presence in the Household for that period represented no menace to the members of her own Families.

There was no purpose to thinking about their continued stay until the Encyclopedic Seat completed a biological analysis. Nor could she determine how much responsibility she was willing to take for possible damage to the Wings-House in further exploration and examination, until she knew for certain that she could offer the Strange children a permanent home in her own Household.

The flying son who had accompanied the two of them on their trip to the *rocket*, had informed her that the barrier on which the daughter's fear seemed centered was, like the rest of the Strange structure, composed of *metal*, and that this *metal* was the hardest wood he had ever seen. It could be cut through, he thought, but not without damage to the fabric that might not be repairable. As for discovering the secret of the mechanism that was designed to hold the *door* closed or allow it to open, he was pessimistic.

There was nothing to do, then, but put the matter from her mind until she had more information.

Accordingly, the Mother gave instructions—when all her children were in communion, after the evening Homecalling—that every member of the Household was to treat the Strange guests with kindness and respect; to guard them from dangers they might fail to recognize; to co-operate with their needs or wishes, insofar as they could express them; and to offer just such friendship—no more and no less—as the young Strangers themselves seemed to desire. She then assigned a well-trained elder daughter (a nurse might have done better in some ways, but she wanted a written record of any information acquired, and that meant it had to be a winged one) to maintain full-time contact with the Strange daughter, so as to answer the visitors' questions and to keep the Household informed of their activities.

With that, she turned her mind to more familiar problems of her Household.

Dee was glad she'd decided to come back. Of course, they couldn't really *stay* here, but just for a little while, it was interesting.

The bugs were really pretty nice people she thought, and giggled at the silly way that sounded . . . calling bugs *people*. But it was hard not to, because they thought about themselves that way, and *acted* that way; and once you got used to how they looked, (And how they looked at you, too: it still felt funny having them turn their backs to you when you talked to them, so they could see you) it was just natural to think of them that way.

Anyhow, they were all nice to her, and especially nice to Petey. She could "talk" to them pretty easily now, too; but she had an idea she wasn't really doing it herself. There was a . . . *big-sister*? . . . bug who was sort of keeping an eye on her, she thought. Not a real eye, of course; she giggled again. Just the kind of an eye that could see pictures in somebody else's head. But any time she wanted to know something, such as whether it was all right to go out, and where could she find some water to mix the food with, and—as now—how to get to one of those gardens—the big-sister-bug would start telling her almost before she asked. And Dee thought that probably most of the other bugs she talked to were at least partway using the big-sister's mind—the way the Mother-bug had helped her "hear" what Petey "said"—because now they all seemed to have pretty much the same kind of "voice". But it was different from the Mothers, or from the one who went to the rocket with her.

That gave her a strange feeling sometimes . . . thinking that maybe the big-sister one was *listening in* on her all the time, but at least it wasn't like with the Mother-bug, who'd make that prickly hurting if you thought something she didn't like. The big-sister-bug didn't try to tell her what to do or what not to do, or put ideas in her head, or anything like that. So if she wanted to just listen all the

time, Deborah supposed it didn't matter much. And it certainly was useful.

Petey was stuck in the mud again; Dee helped him get loose. She couldn't carry him around all the time, so she'd finally settled for not putting any clothes on him except a diaper, and just letting him get as gucky as he wanted to. He'd learned to crawl pretty well on the soft surface; it was just once in a while that he'd put an arm in too deep, or something like that. But he didn't mind, so she didn't either.

She still couldn't see any garden; just the trees and the mud. "How far is it?" she asked or wondered.

"Not much more," Big-sister told her. "Walk around the next tree, and go to . . . to your right."

Just a little farther on, after she turned, Dee saw the sudden splurge of colour. It was a different garden from the one she'd seen the first time; at least the big-sister-bug said it was. The other one was for the tiny babies—the ones who were really about the same age as Petey, but about half his size. This one was for the next oldest bunch, but they were all just about Petey's size, so maybe he could play with them.

It looked just the same, though; the same kind of crazy combinations of colours and shapes. Everything was just as she remembered, except for not being scared now; and when she got right up to it, she saw these bugs weren't nursing on the plants the way the others had been doing. Once in a while, one of them would stop and suck a little while on a tendril; mostly, though, they were chasing each other around, and kind of playing games—just like kindergarten kids any place.

There were two big bugs—the kind that had dark-coloured skins, and had eyes, but didn't have any wings. These ones were nurses, Dee figured. There were others just like these, with different kinds of noses—and some with different kinds of hands—who did other things; but these ones had to be nurses, because they were watching the kids. They were sitting outside the garden, not doing anything, and Dee felt funny about going inside, partly because it was supposed to be for *little* kids, partly because

she was afraid she'd step on one of the plants or something like that. So she let Petey crawl, and she sat down next to the nurses, and just watched.

It was warm in the forest. It was always warm there, but she was getting to like it. She wasn't wearing anything except shorts now, and the only thing she minded was always feeling a little bit *damp*, because the air was so wet. But altogether, she had to admit it was better at least than being in the rocket all by themselves; shut up in there as they had been, Petey was always cranky and fussing about something. Now he was having a good time, so he didn't keep bothering her. And she had the T-Z set back in their room, now, and you didn't even need a light on to work that. Of course, she didn't have very many film-strips for it; she'd have to go back to the rocket pretty soon and get some more.

They'd need some more food, too, and she'd have to get Petey's diapers clean again. She wished there was some way to take along frozen food; then she wouldn't have to fuss around with mixing things with water, and all that, but . . .

The big-sister bug was asking her what she meant by "frozen food," but she'd tried to explain that before.

Anyhow, she had to go back there pretty soon, if she and Petey decided to stay here for a while, because she had to leave a message, so that when somebody came to rescue them, they'd know where to look.

"You wish to visit the Wings-House *now*?" Big-sister asked.

"It's kind of late today," Dee said; "tomorrow, I guess." Sometimes she talked out loud like that, even though she knew it didn't make any difference. All she had to do was *think* what she meant, but sometimes she just talked out loud from habit.

"The litter goes swiftly," said Big-sister. "If you wish to make the visit now . . ."

Tomorrow! This time she didn't say it . . . just thought it extra hard. Big-sister stopped bothering her about it, and she sat still and watched Petey crawling around and grabbing at the pretty colours.

Daydanda received the report personally, and trusted not even her own memory to retain it all, but relayed to three elder daughters, so that whatever errors any one might make in transcription, the records of the others could correct. There was so much technical symbology throughout the message—even though the clerk at the Seat tried to keep it intelligible—that she could not try to comprehend it entirely as it came. She would have to study and examine the meaning of each datum, before she could fully determine what it meant in terms of the questions she had to answer for her Household and the Strangers.

If she had *only* had a pair of Scientists! Communicating with each other, they would have known the purpose of the analysis; communicating with her, Mother and sons, there would have been no problem of translation of symbols. But it was hardly possible to give full information to the Scientists at the Seat, when many of them were from neighbouring or nearby Households, whose best interests were by no means identical with her own. Of course, they vowed impartiality when they took up Encyclopedic work, but . . .

The next breeding, *definitely . . .*! (Kackot, daily more sensitive, came to the archway and peered in. He had taken to working and napping in the other room these few days. She sent a gentle negative). The *very next* breeding would have to be limited to a pair of Scientists! Though now that she had put it off so long, and the youngest babes were already growing too big for fondling . . .

Scientists it would be! The Household needed them. All very well to follow easily along the drive to procreate, but it was necessary, also, to safeguard those already born. And right now, the problem was not one of breeding, or breeding inhibition, but of making enough sense out of the message so that she could come to some decision about the Strangers.

She had the three daughters bring her their copies, and

lay for a long while on her couch, studying and comparing and making rapid notes. Finally, she called to Kackot, and thought as she did so that it would perhaps do something to soothe his wounded feelings, if he felt she was unable to make this decision without his help.

He listened, soberly, and did what she knew she could count on him to do: reformulated, repeated, and advised according to what she wished. Since the report clearly established that the Strangers represented no biologic danger to the Household—their exudations were entirely non-toxic, and some of the solid matter was even useable, containing large quantities of semi-digested cellulose—it was clearly her duty to keep them in the Household, and learn as much as possible from them. Since the report further indicated that normal food would be non-toxic to the Strangers (and Mother and consort both tended to avoid the question, unanswered in the report, of whether normal feeding would supply *all* the nourishment the two Strange children needed), it was possible to extend indefinite hospitality to them.

(After all, if there were elements of nourishment they required beyond what the fungus-foods and wood-honey offered, they could continue to make use of their own supplies... which would last longer if supplemented by native food. So Daydanda eased her conscience).

The question of how far to go in examining the *rocket* was more complicated. The ethic involved . . .

"There is no ethic," Kackot reminded her stiffly, "above the duty of a Mother to her Household. The obligations to a Stranger in the House are sacred, but . . ." He dropped his formality, and ended, smiling and once more at ease ". . . *non-biologic!*" So, again, Daydanda soothed her conscience.

Still, it would be better at least to try to get the child's agreement, even though it was a foregone conclusion that they could not expect her co-operation. The Lady summoned the Strange daughter once more to her chamber.

"I could write the message here, I guess," Dee said thoughtfully. "If you're going to send somebody to the *rocket* anyhow, there's no reason for me to go." It wasn't

as if she couldn't trust them; they wouldn't hurt anything. And anyhow, the Mother said she wanted to keep showing Dee what the son was doing, so they could ask questions whenever they didn't understand something.

Right now, the Mother-bug was feeling a question. "Write a message?" Dee stopped thinking herself, and then she understood. The bugs only used writing for keeping *records* of things. When they wanted to tell somebody something, it didn't matter how far away the person was; so they didn't write things down for other people. Just for themselves, and to make a kind of history for other bugs later on. The Mother wanted to know: wouldn't she "be aware" of the rescue party when it came.

She shook her head, and didn't try to explain anything, because it was just too *different*. "I've got some crayons in my room," she told the Mother-bug, "but I used up all the paper already."

"We have paper." The funny jumpy Father-bug jumped up in his funny way, and went over to a kind of big table full of cubby holes, even before the Mother was done "talking," and got a piece of their kind of paper, and gave it to Dee. The Mother was asking about crayons, what they were and how they worked, but Dee was asking *her* at the same time for something to write with, and what kind of paper was this?

The paper was made out of tree bark, and covered with a kind of waxy stuff that they made in their bodies. They seemed to make everything right inside themselves—as if each bug was a kind of chemicals factory, and you could put in such and such, and turn some switches inside, and get out so-and-so. It was certainly useful, Dee thought, with vague distaste, and then realized nobody had given her a pencil or anything yet.

But you wouldn't use a pencil on this kind of paper. You'd use a stylus, or something sharp.

"Very soon," the Mother-bug said. "My daughter brings you a sharp thing to write with." Then she raised her arm to show Dee where a little sharp horny tip was, on the back of her elbow, that she used herself.

"But how can you see what . . . ?" Dee started to ask.

and then she felt the Mother-bug laughing, and then she laughed herself. It was so hard to get used to people with eyes in the backs of their heads.

One of the nurse-type bugs came in, bowing and crawling the way they always did if they got near the Mother-bug, handed Dee a pointed stick, and crawled out again.

"I am staying with some bugs in a big house," Dee scratched as clearly as she could through the wax. The bark underneath was orangy-coloured, and the wax was white, so it showed through pretty well. "My baby brother Petey is with me. Please come and get us." Then she signed it, "Deborah (DEE) Levin." And then realized she hadn't put anything in about *how* to find them. She tried to ask the Mother, but so far they hadn't been able to get together on that kind of thing at all. The bugs didn't use measurements or distances or directions the same way; they just seemed to *know* where to go, and how far they were.

"We will know if Strangers come," the Mother promised her; "we will go to them."

Dee thought that over, and added to her message: "P.S. If some big bugs come around, don't shoot. They're friends; they're taking care of Petey and me." And put her initials at the end, the way you're supposed to do with a P.S.

"When is he going?" she asked. "I mean, should I stay here, so you can ask me questions, or do you want me to come back later?" Petey was getting kind of restless, and he wanted something, but she wasn't sure what.

"The brother wishes to return to the garden," the Mother explained. "He understands what I told you about the food. He wanted to suck on the sweet plants before, but was afraid. Now he desires to return to the garden and to the other children, and suck as they do." Then she said her son was going to the ship right away; but if Dee wanted to go to the garden with Petey, that was all right; the Mother-bug could talk to her just as well that way.

"I'd rather . . . I'd kind of rather *look* at you when we talk," Dee said. She knew it seemed silly to them, because they weren't used to it, but she couldn't help it. Anyhow, she got a kind of good feeling being in the Mother-bug's

room. The first time she came in here it was *awful*, but right now she felt nervous or something. She didn't know why, but she *did* know she'd feel better if she stayed here with the big old bug.

"Stay then, my child."

One of the ones with wings came in; this kind just bowed, they didn't crawl. He took the message from Dee, and went back to the garden; then they just waited for a while.

The mother was busy, thinking someplace else, and the Father-bug gave her a funny feeling when she tried to talk to him, because he wasn't like a Daddy at all. Not the way the big fat bug was like a real Mother. The skinny, jumpy one was nervous and fussy and worried; and Dee thought he probably didn't like her very much. So she just sat still, squatting on the floor with her back against the wall, and thought maybe she'd go get her T-Z set and look at something till the Mother-bug was ready. But it was warm and comfortable and she didn't want to go away, out of this room, where the Mother was just like a Mother was a Mother—so she sort of rolled over a little bit, and curled up right on the floor and closed her eyes. If she didn't *look* at the piled-up mats and the ugly old belly on top, it felt more like a Mother than ever before for a long time since it was so warm, hot, glowing red, and the voice said, *fire . . . fire . . . fire . . .*

That was on Hallowe'en, all black and orange, witches and ghosts, and the witch said, "Fire! Fire! Run! Run!" but the ghost looked like a big fat bug, only white, except the white ones don't have eyes; and this one had two great big hollow eyeholes; and it was crying because it couldn't find the little girl who should have opened . . . opened her eyes, so she could see, why didn't she open her eyeholes, so she could see the little girl? Because the little girl had no eyes, only it didn't matter as long as the door was closed, the ghost couldn't get through a safety safety safe; the little girl is safe, on Hallowe'en when the ground is black and behind the door is black, black, black you can't see, and black it's all burned up, and the ghost is white; so there's no ghost there in the black, only a

great big ugly bugley belly all swell up with white dead long time . . . *No!* . . . all black for Hallowe'en, black, black. . . .

XXII

The lady heard; and by her lights, she understood. It was a sick and ugly thing to hear, and a terrible sad thing to comprehend.

A Mother of fourteen Families is, perforce, accustomed to grief and fear and failing; she has suffered time and again the agonies of flesh and spirit with which her children met the tests of growth: the fears of battle, terror of departure, pains of hunger, the awful shrinking from death. The time they almost lost their House to swarming hostile Families; the time the boy died in the ravenous claws of their own Bigheads; the time the rotten-fungus-sickness spread among them . . . time after time; but never, in all the crowded years of life-giving and life-losing had Daydanda known a sickness such as now shouted at her from the Strange girl's dream.

Even her curiosity would have faltered before this outpouring, but she *could* not turn away. One listens to a troubled child's dream to diagnose, to find a remedy... but *this!* If it were possible to invade the barriers of a full-grown Mother of crime, one might find sorrow and fear and torment such as this.

As the sunlight had seared her eyeball, so the hellfires of the childish dreaming burned her soul.

The girl desired that they should find her Mother dead!

There was no other way to make sense of it. Daydanda tried. Everything in her fought against even the formulation of such a statement. It was not only evil, but impossible . . . *unnatural*. Non-biologic.

The child wanted to know that her Mother had been burned to death.

Within the shining rocket, Daydanda's son moved curiously, feeling and touching each Strange object cautiously, examining with his eager eye each Strange and inexplicable shape. He waited there, unable to be still in the

presence of so much to explore; too fearful of doing damage to explore further till his Mother's mind met his. But the Lady could not be disturbed, the sibling at relay duty said; the Lady was refusing all calls, accepting no contact.

Wait!

He waited.

Non-biologic . . . But what did she know of the biology of a Stranger? Even as much as the clerk at the Seat had told her, from the analysis of scrapings and samplings—even that much she did not fully understand, and that could not be more than a fractional knowledge in any case.

She could not, would not, believe that the Strange daughter's Strange complex of feelings and fears and desires was as subjectively *sick* as it seemed, by her own standards and experience, to be. A different biologic economy—which most assuredly they had—or a completely different reproductive social organization . . .

It was possible. The child's independence and resourcefulness . . . her untrained awareness of self and others . . . her lack of certainty even as to whether her Mother still lived . . . the very existence of two siblings of such widely divergent age and size, without even a suggestion of others who had departed, or been left behind . . .

Till now, the Mother had been trying to fit these two Strange children somehow into the patterns of her own world. But she remembered what she had considered at the time to be childish over-statement, or just a part of the confusion of the girl's mind as to place, time, and direction.

From another world . . .

From above the treetops, but that had not been startling. A nesting couple always descended from above the trees, after the nuptial flight. From above the treetops, *but not from below them. From another world . . . !*

Kackot was hovering nervously above her. The daughter on relay was asking again on behalf of the son at the Strange ship. The daughters in the corral wished to report . . .

To Kackot and the son both, imperative postponements. She clamped control on her seething mind long enough to determine that it was no emergency in the corral, then closed them all out again, and tried to think more clearly.

The dream was still too fresh in her mind. And now there was more data to be had. Don't think, then . . . just to regain one's sanity, detachment, ability to weigh and to consider. One cannot open contact with the child while looking upon her as a monster.

(A monster! That's how I seemed to her!)

Perspective returned slowly. She groped for Kackot's soothing thoughts, refusing to inform him yet, but gratefully accepting his concern. Then the son, waiting resolutely inside the Strange Wings-House. And last, the child . . . Strange child of a Strange world.

"Very well," she told them all calmly, or so she hoped. "Let us commence."

Dee was getting tired of it. For a while, it was sort of fun, looking at things the way the son-bug saw them, and watching how clumsy he was every time he tried to do anything the way she told him. Even if these bugs didn't have any machines themselves, you had to be pretty dumb not to be able to just turn a knob when somebody explained it to you.

She realized she was being rude again. It was hard to remember, sometimes, that you shouldn't even *think* anything impolite around here. It would be pretty good for some kids she knew, to come here for a while . . .

"Other children . . . others like yourself?" the Mother felt all excited. "Of your own Family?"

Dee shook her head. "No; just some of the kids who were in the Scout Troop on Starhope."

"Others . . . brothers and sisters . . . from your Household then?"

She had to think about that, to figure out the right answer. A town or a dome or a city was kind of like the Household here . . . but of course, the other kids weren't brothers and sisters, just because you played with them and went to school together. "Petey's the only brother I have," she said.

She didn't think she'd made it very clear, but she had a feeling that the Mother was kind of glad about the answer. She didn't know why; and anyhow, it had nothing to do with the rocket. The son-bug was waiting for his Mother to pay attention to him again.

For a minute, everybody seemed to go away. *Telling secrets!* Dee thought irritably. She was beginning to get very bored now, just sitting here answering a lot of silly questions. They'd already put the message on the waxbark up where anybody who came in could see it, and the son-bug had a batch of diapers cleaned for Petey, and a lot of food picked out of the dry storage cabinet. She hoped it was stuff she liked. She couldn't read the labels when she was looking through his eye; anyhow they didn't need her around any more.

"Don't be silly," she said out loud. "There isn't any door to open; they're both open." *Now what did I say that for?* "Listen, I better go see how Petey's getting along. I don't like him trying out that fungus food all by himself. I better . . ."

She started to stand up, but the Mother said quietly, "Soon. Soon, child. Just a little more. You did not understand; we wish to know how to *close* the door . . . just how to operate the mechanism. My son is eager to try his skill at turning knobs to make machines work."

"You mean the airlock? You can't close that from outside. But if he just wants to try it out while he's inside, I guess that's all right. It's kind of complicated, though; he might get stuck in there or something, and . . ."

"No child. The airlock is the double-arch opening in the outer wall, is it not?"

". . . yes, and I don't think he better . . ."

"He does not wish to experiment with that one. My son is brave, but not foolish. Only the other, the inner door. If you will . . ."

"Okay, but then I want to go see Petey, all right?"

"As you please."

"Okay. Well, you have to turn the lever on the right hand side . . ."

"No, please . . . make a picture in your mind. Move your own hand. Pretend to stand before it, and to do as you would do yourself. Think a picture."

No! It won't open again! That was a silly thing to think. *But all the food's in there!*

"He will not close it then, child. Only show him *how* it works, how he *would* close it if he did. He will not; I promise he will not."

She showed him. She pretended to be doing it herself, but she felt strange; and when she was done showing him, she took a good look through the Mother and through him to make sure he hadn't really done it. The door was still open though.

"Thank you, my child. You wish to go to the garden now?"

Dee nodded, and felt the Mother go away, and almost ran out. She felt very strange.

Wearily, the Lady commended her son for his intelligent perception, and queried him about his ability to operate the mechanism. He was a little doubtful. She reassured him: such work was not in his training; he had done well. She ordered two of her mason-builder sons to join their winged sibling in the ship, and left instructions to be notified when they were ready to begin.

She tried to rest, meanwhile, but there was too much confusion in her mind: too much new information not yet integrated. And more to come. Better perhaps to wait a bit before they tried that door? *No!* She caught herself with a start, realized that she had absorbed so much of the Strange daughter's terror of . . . of what lay beyond . . .

What lay beyond? Because the child feared it, there was no cause for *her* to fear as well. It was all inside the girl's subjective world, the thing that was not to be known, the thing that made the door unopenable. It was all part and parcel of the child's failure to be aware of her own Mother's life or death, of . . .

Of the *sickness* in the dream. She, Daydanda, had brought that sickness into her Household. It was up to her now, to diagnose and cure it—or to cast it out. Such

fears were communicable; she had seen it happen, or heard of it at least.

When a mother dies, there is no way to tell what will happen to her sons and daughters. Even among one's own people, strange things may occur. One Household she had heard of, after the sudden death of the Mother, simply continued to go about the ordinary tasks of every day, as though no change were noticed. It could not last, of course, and did not. Each small decision left unmade, each little necessary change in individual performance, created a piling-up confusion that led at last to the inevitable result: when undirected workers no longer cared for the food supplies; when the reckless unprepared winged ones flew off to early deaths in premature efforts to skim the tree-tops; when nurses ceased to care for hungry Bigheads, or for crying babes, the starving soldiers stormed the corral fences, swarmed into the gardens and the House, and feasted first on succulent infants; then on lean workers, and at last—to the vast relief of neighbouring Households—on each other.

For a time, Dayana had thought the Strange child's curious mixture of maternal and sibling attitudes to be the product of some similar situation—that the girl was simply trying not to *believe* her Mother's death, and somehow to succeed in being daughter and Mother both in her own person. But the dream made that hopeful theory impossible to entertain any longer.

Nor was it possible now to believe that the two children were the remnants of any usual Household. The girl had been too definite about the lack of any other siblings, now or *in the past*.

What then? Try to discard all preconceptions. These are Strange creatures from *another world*. Imagine a biology in which there is no increase in the race—only replacement. The Lady recalled, or thought she did, some parasitic life in the Household of her childhood wherein the parent-organism had to die to make new life . . .

The parent had to die!

Immediately, her mind began to clear. Not sickness then

. . . not foul untoachable confusion, but a *natural* Strangeness. Daydanda remembered thinking of the fires of the landing as a ritual . . . and now more fire . . . the Mother must be burned before the young one can mature? Some biologic quality of the ash, perhaps? Something . . . if that were so, it would explain, too, the child's persistent self-reminder that she *must* return to the *rocket*, even while she yearned to stay here where safety and protection lay.

It was fantastic, but fantastic only by the standards of the familiar world. Mother and consort bring the young pair, male and female, to a new home; and in the fires of landing, the parent-creatures die . . . *must* die before the young pair can develop.

She thought a while soberly, trying this fact and that to fit the theory, and each Strange-shaped piece of the puzzle fitted the next with startling ease.

Perhaps if a world became too crowded, after many Households had grown up, some life-form of this kind might evolve, and . . . yes, *of course!* . . . that would explain as well the efforts at migration over vast distances across the glaring sky.

The Lady was prepared now to discover what lay behind the door; her sons were waiting on her wishes.

XXIII

Petey was chasing a young bug just a little bit bigger than he was round and round a mushroom shape that stood as high as Dec herself. Out of the foot-wide base of the great plant, a lacy network of lavender and light green tendrils sprouted. Deborah watched them play, the bug-child scampering on all sixes, Petey on all fours; and she didn't worry even when they both got tired and stopped and lay down half-sprawled across each other, to suck on adjoining juicy tendrils.

One of the nurses had already told her that Petey had tried some of the fungus juice when he first came out to the garden. That must have been a couple of hours ago, at least. Dee wasn't sure how long she'd been asleep, there in the Mother-bug's room, but she thought it was getting

on toward evening now. And she knew that a baby's digestion works much more quickly than a grown-up's; if the stuff was going to hurt him, he'd be acting sick by now.

Probably she shouldn't have let him try it at all, until she tested some first herself. She still didn't really want to, though; and when the Mother said it was all right for him, she hadn't thought to worry about it.

She couldn't keep on fussing over him every minute, anyhow. Besides, that wasn't good for babies either. You have to let them take chances or they'll never grow up . . . *where did I hear that?* . . . somebody had said that . . .

She shook her head, then smiled, watching the two kids, Petey and the bug, playing again. Petey was chortling and laughing and drooling. She decided it was probably pretty safe to trust whatever the Mother-bug said.

The Strange Mother and her consort were indeed inside the *ship*, behind the door the child wouldn't see; and they were most certainly dead.

"It is . . . they look . . ." Her son had not liked it, looking at them. "I think the fire's heat did as the teaching-nurse has told us might happen when we go above the tree-tops, if we fly too long or too high in the dry sun's heat." He had had trouble giving a clear visimage to her, because he did not like to look at what he saw. But the skin, he said, judging by that of the children, was darkened, and the bodies dehydrated. They were strapped into twisted couches, as though to prevent their escape. That and the locked door . . . the *taboo* door?

Each item fitted into the only theory that made sense. For some biologic reason, or some reason of tradition on an overcrowded home-world, it was necessary that the parents die as soon as a nesting place for the young couple was found. And the curious conflict in the Strange daughter's mind—the wish that her Mother was burned, with refusal to accept her Mother's death . . .

After all, many a winged one about to depart forever from the childhood home—not knowing whether happiness and fertility will come, or sudden death, or lonely lingering starvation . . . many a one has left with just such a complex of opposite-wishes.

But Daydanda could not tell, from what her son had said, or what he showed, whether the parents were *burned*, within the child's meaning of the word. The son was not so certain, even that the heat had been responsible for death, directly. The room, when he first opened up the door, was filled with a thick grey cloud which dispersed too quickly to make sure if his guess was right; but he took it to be smoke... cold smoke. No one could breathe and live through a dozen heartbeats in that cloud, he said.

Whether the cloud formed first, or the heat did its work beforehand, the two were surely dead when their children came back from the first swift trip into the forest, that much was sure.

Whether they had themselves locked the door, and placed a taboo on opening it, or whether the daughter had obeyed the custom of her people in sealing it off, was also impossible to determine—now.

This much, however, was clear: that the children had had ample opportunity to learn the truth for themselves if they wished, or if it were proper for them to do so. There had been no difficulty opening the door, not even for her sons who were unused to such mechanisms. The daughter knew how to do it; the daughter would not do it. Finally: the daughter had been *purposefully* set free to develop without the protection of her Mother.

If Daydanda had been certain that the protection of a foster-Mother would also inhibit the growth of the Strange children, she might have hesitated longer. As it was, she asked her consort what he thought, and he of course replied: "It might be, my Lady, my dear, that these Strange people live only as parasites in the Houses of such as ourselves. See how their Wings are a semi-House, not settled in one location, but designed for transport. See how they chose a landing place almost equidistant from ourselves and our neighbours, as if to give the young ones a little better chance to find a Household that would accept them. It would seem to me, my dear, my Lady, that our course is clear."

Daydanda was pleased with his advice. And it was time for the Homecalling. The Lady sent out her summons,

loud and clear and strong for all to hear: a warning to unfriendly neighbours; a promise and renewal to all her children, young and old.

Dee lay on her mat in the chamber she still shared with Petey, and watched the T-Z, but she did not watch it well. Her mind was too full of other things.

The Mother wanted them to stay and . . . "join the Household." She wasn't sure just what that would mean. Doing chores, probably, and things like that. She didn't mind that part; it would be kind of nice to *belong* somewhere . . . until the rescue party came.

That was the only thing. She hoped the Mother understood that part, but she wasn't sure. They couldn't just *stay here*, of course.

But it might be quite a while before anybody came after them, and meanwhile . . . she looked at Petey, sleeping with a smile on his small fat face, and on his round fat bottom a new kind of diaper, made by the bug-people the same way they made the sleeping mats, only smaller and thinner. That was so she wouldn't have to bother with cleaning the cloth ones any more.

Petey was certainly happier here, but she'd have to watch out, she thought. If the rescue party took too long to come, he'd be more like a bug than a human!

She went back to watching the T-Z set. She had to learn a lot of things, in case she was the only person who could teach Petey anything. Tomorrow, the very next day, she was going to start really teaching him to talk. He could say words all right, if he tried. And with the bugs just in and out of your head, the way they were, he'd never try if she didn't get him started right away.

She turned back the reel, and started the film from the beginning again, because she'd missed so much.

The Lady of the House was pleased.

—JUDITH MERRIL

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